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APRIL 1947

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Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a scene
from "You Can't Hang Me!"

Published bi-monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 3, N. Y. Washington office, International Building, 1319 F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. Subscription \$2.50 for 12 issues; Canada \$3.00; Foreign \$4.50. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



All Stories Complete

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YOU CAN'T HANG ME! (Short novel—23,000) by Warren Kastel 8

Illustrated by Robert Fuqua

Lila wanted Jim to plead guilty to a traffic charge. But the penalty was death by hanging!

THE MAN IN THE MUSEUM (Short novel—25,000) by Dwight V. Swain 50

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The trouble in killing people who need it is that you must kill the innocent to protect yourself.

SO MUCH CAN GO WRONG (Short novel—24,000) by Robert Moore Williams 94

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Each time Digger thought of the Weems' case, he smelled horse weeds and got mad again.

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Larry couldn't give up on his worthless brother until gangster bullets cut down children.

NEVER TOO LATE (Short—4,200) by Ray Darby 152

Illustrated by W. A. Gray

When an injury keeps a man quiet, his mind starts working. The Devil can use idle minds.

THE REYNOLDS' CASE (Short—6,500) by William P. McGivern 160

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Just another "missing persons" case . . . until the missing person came around and called it off!

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THE CALL BOX



REPORT BY THE EDITOR

WE HAVE a sneaking hunch that by now you've already formed an opinion on our front cover this month. We think Arnold Kohn has done a mighty sweet job on painting this one—and we want to give credit to our art department for a remarkably fine job of layout. It has always been an amazing thing to us to realize that the readers pay strict attention to covers and illustrations and to the artists who create them. Illustrating this issue of *MAMMOTH MYSTERY* are no less than seven different artists: Artemus Replogle; Brady; Arnold Kohn; H. W. McCauley; William A. Gray; Enoch Sharp and Robert Fuqua. Incidentally, Robert Fuqua has been persuaded to become a member of our own art staff, and we'll be seeing more of his excellent work in these pages. That's the first good news from the Art Department in a long time.

THE same newsstand where you picked up this copy of *MAMMOTH MYSTERY* probably still has an issue or two of its sister publication in stock. We mean *Mammoth Detective* for April, and it contains a 30,000 word novel by Robert Moore Williams, called "Somebody Wants You Dead." We think it is one of the best detective novels in print today. It, too, has an excellent chance of being brought out in book form, but you can read it *now*.

FOR the next issue your editor has really pulled a fast one. As a result, we're giving you the sweetest mystery novel we've yet published. Here's how it happened: If you don't know it, the publishers of *MAMMOTH MYSTERY* also publish books. A specialty of the Ziff-Davis book department is "Fingerprint Mysteries," many of which you've picked up at two-fifty, no doubt. Well, Bruno Fischer, writing his sixth novel, sent Z-D a book manuscript called "More Deaths than One." Your editor, who can smell a manuscript within a mile (no cracks, please!), got hold of it and read it. Well, we have just enough influence (and just enough highwayman instinct) to snatch the story for the future pages of *MAMMOTH MYSTERY*. So there you are—you will be paying two-bits for a two-fifty novel; and, ladies and gentlemen, we think it's one hell of a good story! 75,000 words long—a length no other pulp magazine can handle in a single issue—and every one of those words as good as anything you'll find between hard covers today.

WE CALL special attention to a story in this issue, a story written by a man whose name you'll be seeing in the smooth paper markets before long, we're sure. The name is Paul Fairman, and the story is "Bad Blood." We went to special effort to get this yarn for you, and we hope it gives you the kick we believed it would.

DURING the past two months we have been lining up full-length detective and mystery novels to reward the readers of both our detective magazines. And we have succeeded—and how! Just to give you something to make you lick your chops and look longingly into the future, let us list a few of them for you.

FIRST, of course, is the Bruno Fischer novel already mentioned, which puts this author into the class we've been predicting he would hit. Then there's a new Milton Ozaki novel in the works (you'll remember his "Cuckoo Clock" which drew down raves from you readers and fine reviews from the country's mystery reviewers when the story came out in book form. This one is about a new set of characters and is rapid-fire action and unforgettable plot all the way. Then—hold on to your hats, boys and girls!—the new FRANK GRUBER novel about Johnny Fletcher and Sam Craig! Gruber's yarns about this inimitable pair have appeared in literally hundreds of thousands of copies during the past few years, and several have gone into the movies. Frank is one of Hollywood's best-known scenario writers, with such pictures to his credit as "Mask for Dimitrios," and others. . . . Another story you won't want to miss is the new "Michael Shayne" novel, written by Brett Halliday and also scheduled for book publication. Stories about Mike Shayne have appeared in both the movies and radio as well as many books. Incidentally, a couple or three boys who have yet to get a story between hard covers, are making threatening gestures in that direction. Take Paul Fairman, for instance, whose story in this issue we've already mentioned. He's about half through a novel that we've already tied him up on. And Larry Holden (you remember his "Dinny Keogh" yarns) is doing the rewrite on a novel for us. Even your old friend Bill McGivern has got the bug!

THAT ends the newsy part of your magazine for this issue. See you again in sixty days.

—H. B.

ADVICE TO READERS:

who are suffering the miseries of

BAD SKIN

Stop Worrying Now About Pimples and Blackheads

and other externally caused skin troubles

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S
SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



SQUEEZING pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Because doing so may also be injurious and leave your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Good-Looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same healthy, normal complexion free from externally caused skin troubles simply by giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing may not do.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of incomplete or faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser which penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out; they dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free of the specks that often bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

It's Foolish to Take Bad Skin for Granted

It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsome and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH,**

CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive Viderm formula may help you.

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to keep it smooth and clear. Use Viderm Skin Cleanser when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little Viderm Medicated Skin Cream and that's all there is to it. Viderm Medicated Skin Cream quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident that you will keep a smooth and clear complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment; then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smooth, clear skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 46; New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both

of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.

DON'T DO THIS!

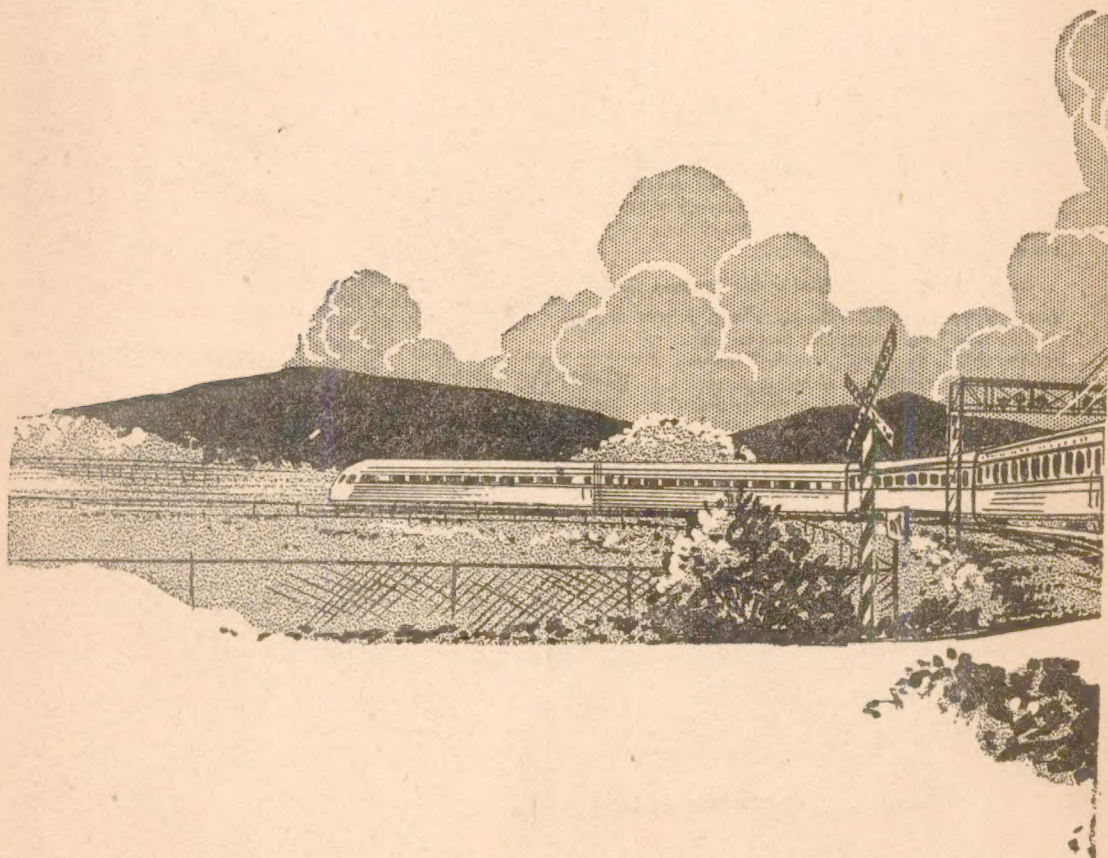


Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

You Can't Hang Me!

by Warren Kastel

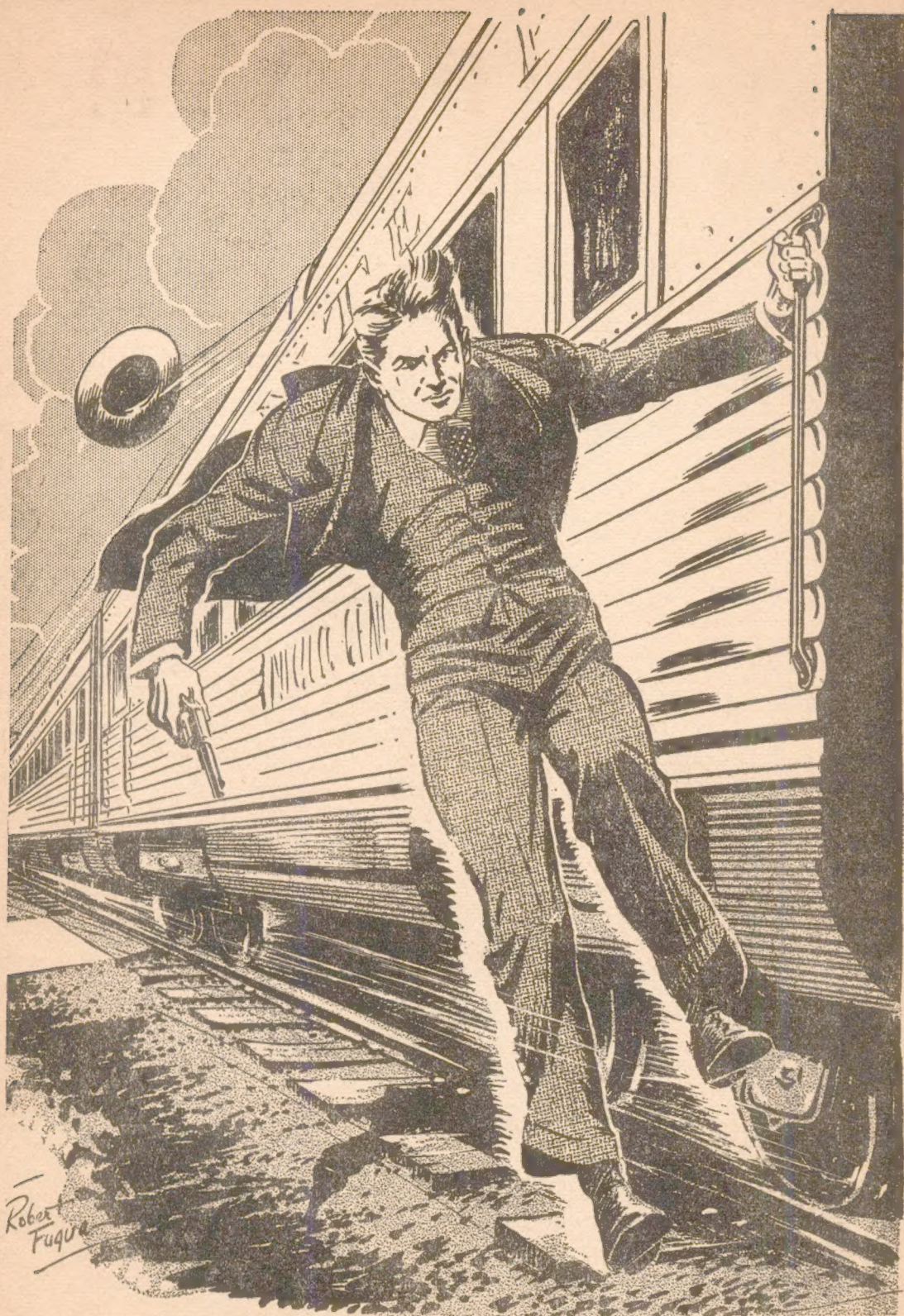
Just as a favor to an old girl friend I posed as her husband to answer a warrant for speeding. But it seemed the husband did other unlawful things—murder, for instance!



CHAPTER I

I STOOD outside the building for a long time, just standing there, looking at it. As buildings go it was nothing special to look at. Just a nice classy apartment hotel on Sheri-

dan Road just north of Addison Street. It had the usual windows with the usual awnings for eyelids, and most of them were lowered to block off the hot morning sun. In a way it made the



To jump could mean broken bones; to stay aboard could mean a broken neck!

building look tired, with its eyes half shut, as if it wanted to go and lay down somewhere. I kind of had that feeling myself. I get that way every time I come into a big city like Chicago. It makes you feel cramped and tired—just being there. But maybe I've lived on open land too long.

There was a nice shady canopy over the entrance that looked pretty inviting from where I was standing. But I knew that once I got that far I'd have to go all the way. And I began to wonder if it was worth it.

But wondering about that made me think of Lila. It was worth it.

I walked under the canopy, into the lobby and stood there a moment looking around and enjoying the air-conditioned coolness. There was the usual lush furniture with a few potted palms thrown in to give the place a Palm Beach complex, and a nice thick rug that tickled my ankles. Only a few of the chairs were occupied, but since I hadn't come in to sit down I didn't pay them much attention.

At the desk a clerk was busily reading a copy of the *New Yorker* as I walked up, and from the way his eyes ate up the ads he was probably mentally downing a cool one at the *Martini*. I waited until he was finished and then tapped my hand on the counter.

"Lila Stevens' room number, please."

He looked up from the *New Yorker*, gave me a few quick glances of interest, and then apparently decided that I wasn't worth the effort. He was still in New York.

"Suite 404, sir. . . . Are you her husband?"

I started to say no, but changed my mind. A no would have brought him back to Chicago, and he was better off in New York.

"Yes, that's right. Her husband."

By the time I got to the elevator he was back in his magazine. I had probably spoiled his day.

I got off at the fourth floor and walked down a long, cool, silent corridor. I finally found 404, and halted in front of it, and for the first time felt a funny feeling in my throat. The kind of nervousness you hate but can't do anything about. I pressed the buzzer.

It seemed like a long time before she opened the door. But after that it was no time at all before I had the door closed again—behind me—and had her in my arms and felt her lips clinging against mine.

I could have done that forever, but she pushed me away with a breathless little laugh.

"Jim! Jim Marks, aren't you forgetting something?"

I looked at the delicate curve of her mouth where the lipstick hadn't even smeared, at her hair spilling golden nuggets around her shoulders, and at the rest of her down to the tips of her shoes, and even they seemed nice because she was wearing them, and said:

"I don't think so. But I'll start all over again and maybe I'll think of it."

I stepped toward her and that nervousness in my throat was now an ache, and as quickly, she stepped away.

"Jim—I'm married, remember?"

That stopped me. She could have said anything else and I'd have kept on coming. But that stopped me.

"I was trying to forget that. I've been trying to for a long time."

She stood looking at me, and then her eyes softened and she came up to me and took my hand.

"Sit down, Jim—over here."

She led me to a long, low divan that was done up in a silk brocade. I sat down beside her and continued to hold on to her hand.

"Drink?" she smiled, and pulled her

hand gently away. I let it go and nodded.

SHE got up and walked across the room to a mahogany liquor cabinet. I watched her getting busy with glasses and ice and then looked around the room.

It wasn't very large, and there wasn't too much furniture in it. But what there was was good stuff. A couple of chairs to match the couch I was sitting on, a handsome Capehart with an album of Gershwin records on top, the liquor cabinet, and a leather topped desk that matched the radio and liquor cabinet. Three windows with awnings at half mast looked out over Sheridan Road and the lake, and a door in the far wall between her and the liquor cabinet led to a small hall and other doors. All of them closed.

"Any husbands hiding around?" I asked her as she handed me a glass and sat down again.

She saw my glance at the hall and the doors and laughed.

"Would it make you feel better if I opened them?"

"Should it?"

"You might feel safer."

"I'm not worried."

She shook her head. "The same old Jim."

I picked that one up. "He used to be pretty good before Frank Stevens came along. . . . By the way, where is this Frank? The clerk downstairs seemed to think I was your husband."

Her eyes lowered a little as she sipped at her drink. I hadn't tasted mine yet.

"I just moved into this apartment. We've been staying in hotels, a day here, a day there, and then a week ago I found this vacancy for the summer."

"You found it?"

She nodded her head and a few of

the golden curls spilled around her throat. "Frank hasn't seen it yet. He's out of town on business."

I finally sipped my drink and found that good scotch will make any water taste good. Then I put the drink down and fished in my coat pocket for a cigarette. When I found it she already had two lighted and offered me one. I smiled and took it, remembering that this was one habit of hers that had always seemed cute.

I drew in on the cigarette and tried to think of something to say. It wasn't panning out just as I had expected. But then, I wasn't too sure just what I had expected. After all, she *was* married.

"I'm glad to see you, Jim."

I looked over at her and she wasn't laughing. Her face was smooth and sober and beautiful. I moved over to her on the couch and slipped my arm around her shoulder.

"I was waiting to hear you say that," I told her.

"I said it, Jim—and I meant it."

The ache was back in my throat again as I kissed her. Only this time she didn't try to push me away. Her fingers tightened on my arms and I could feel her nails through my coat and shirt. It was a pleasant pain. I kissed her cheeks and her eyes and her hair and the ache was a roaring throb now. An earring slipped off and fell someplace but I didn't give a damn. I could feel her breathing hard as I whispered in her ear.

"Why didn't you wait for me, Lila? Why did you have to marry him?"

A little shudder swept through her and her arms tightened around me convulsively.

"I don't know, Jim. Maybe it was because I wanted a home and security, and—"

"Do you call this a home? And what

kind of security? Money? Is that it? When I got your last letter—"

She tried to push away from me but I held her, and then she turned her head and I kissed her again.

"Please don't say that again, ever. It isn't money—it's well I'm all right until I see you . . ."

"You love me. You know you do."

"Yes, Jim, I love you . . ."

"And Frank? What about him?"

"I, I don't know! . . . Jim, I'm so unhappy."

SHE put her head against my shoulder and began to cry. It wasn't a wracking sob, it was intimate and quiet, an emotion that had to be gotten rid of somehow. It let her cry and after awhile she stopped.

"My face must be a mess. . . . I couldn't help it."

I looked at her cheeks and the little wet lines that had run down them. "Your face is beautiful, Lila. It's the most beautiful face I've ever seen."

She wiped the tears away and smiled. "Is that the writer talking?"

"Maybe it sounds corny, but that's the way I feel."

She reached out and patted my hand. Then she picked up her drink from an end table and looked at me over the edge of the glass.

"Lila."

I could see her lips move through the glass. "Yes, Jim?"

"What are we going to do?"

She sipped at the drink, put it down again, and looked toward the windows. "I don't know. . . . What can we do?"

"You can get a divorce. You know you don't love him. You said you loved me."

She turned her head back and I could tell she was thinking because her eyes weren't seeing me just then.

"It's not that easy. You don't snap

your fingers and say 'divorce' and then have it over with."

"You're not happy with him."

"I'm not?"

"You said so before. Besides, you can't love two people."

She took a long time before answering. When she did, there was a tremor in her voice.

"But I owe him something, Jim. I'm his wife, and he loves me."

"I need you too."

"You don't understand. Frank is a business man, and I'm able to help him—entertaining for him and meeting the right people. He leans on me, like right now. He has the biggest deal of his life on. He stands to make a lot of money, and I—"

"You're back to that security you talked about. That old thing called money."

She didn't get mad. Maybe I wanted her to get mad but she didn't. She just bit her lower lip and shook her head slowly.

"You know that's not true. You think I married him because he could give me money, but it's not true!"

"What did you marry him for?"

She leaned her head back against the back of the couch and when I saw the tears in her eyes I was sorry I had said it. I leaned over and took her hand in mine and said:

"Forget what I said, Lila. I'm sorry. But that still doesn't settle anything between you and me. What about us?"

She touched my face lightly with her other hand and her eyes were wistful. "You know how I feel about you, Jim. But right now I just can't answer. Maybe after Frank's deal goes through things will be different."

I didn't get the pitch. Every little thing she said turned back to money, and yet I knew it couldn't be that

because she seemed willing to leave him.

"And what about after that?"

"After that he'll be set, and it won't be so much of a shock. . . . You don't know Frank."

That was for sure. But he must have been some guy to get Lila to marry him. I squeezed her hand.

"O.K. So I wait. But as soon as Frank is money happy, that's all."

"That's all." She laughed and the melancholy mood was gone. "Let's drink to it!"

I lifted my glass to hers, drained it, and felt better.

SHE put her glass down, looked at her wrist watch, and frowned.

"What's the matter, got an appointment?"

"You might call it that, in a way. I'm supposed to be in court by one o'clock."

"In court?" I probably looked very funny with my mouth open.

"Don't be silly, Jim. It's nothing serious—just a speeding ticket. But I do hate to go—I never liked court-rooms."

I grinned at her. "Why didn't you give the traffic cop a smile? You'd have had him eating out of your hands."

"Oh, but it wasn't me. It was Frank."

"Frank?"

"Yes. He was speeding on the Drive—at least the ticket says that, and it was reckless driving to boot. It also says you've got to appear or be arrested."

"Then that's Frank's worry. They can make it pretty stiff if he doesn't show up, and your going down there won't help him any."

"But I've got to go. I can tell the Judge that Frank isn't in town and—"

Her voice broke off and she stared at me. From the look in her eyes I got the idea that something was hatching in her pretty little head.

"Jim, would you do me a big favor?"

After all my fancy talk I'd have looked pretty silly saying no. "What is it?"

"Jim, *you* could go down to the court for me. You could pay the fine and everything."

"Aren't you forgetting that my name is Jim Marks—it's not Stevens."

"But you could say it was Stevens—they'd never know the difference. All you'd have to do would be to plead guilty and pay the fine."

"You're forgetting something."

"What?"

"A driver's license. In Illinois they punch your driver's license."

"But I've got Frank's driver's license. He left it with me when he got on the train. It's a Delaware license."

"I shook my head. "They'd probably want identification since it's an out of state license."

"I've got his social security card and a few more. You could take those."

"It sounds like a vicious plot to get me behind bars."

"Oh Jim, be serious! You could do it, then I wouldn't have to stand there and answer questions and maybe get things all mixed up. After all, a speeding ticket isn't anything."

"So I'm supposed to play boy scout for Frank. Well, maybe I owe him that much—for you."

"Then you'll do it?"

"I guess so."

She leaned across and kissed me. "You're a dear!"

I watched her walk across the room to the leather topped desk and open a drawer. I got up off the couch and walked over beside her. She pushed

a white slip of paper at me. It said in effect that Frank Stevens had been pinched for speeding and reckless driving and that he better show up at one p.m. in room 800 in the traffic court at 11th and State. Then she shoved a social security card in my hand, and an identification card. I looked at that one.

"Now I know why you married him," I told her.

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It says it right here. He's my height, has my hair, and but for ten pounds he has my weight. I'll bet I look prettier though."

"Now you're being silly."

"Anyway I found out why you married him."

She didn't answer but pushed the desk drawer shut. I got out my wallet.

"He's got more identification than I have. Never had a social security card. Don't need one in my racket. Anyway, writers never live long."

"Who says so?"

I shrugged. "The critics. They murder writers. . . . What'll I do with my own cards?"

"You can leave them here. You'll be coming back . . ."

I looked into her eyes, saw what was there, and took her in my arms.

"You bet I'll be coming back."

CHAPTER II

THE elevator I got into at the Central Police Station was a pretty crowded affair. At that there were only three people besides myself in it, but they were all cops. It was still crowded.

I walked into room 800 at five minutes to one. It turned out to be a courtroom, but not the kind you see in the movies. There were about twenty rows of hard-backed benches, bare gray

walls, and up front a long wooden railing. In front of the railing there was some more wood in the shape of a raised dais with a long desk parked on top of it, and behind it a fat old codger with a bald head was staring down his nose at three people.

One of them was obviously a lawyer. He was standing in shirt-sleeves, with his fingers hooked into the belt of his trousers, and giving with a long winded oration on how innocent the young juvenile delinquent before him was, and how really it was the fault of the kid's father (who was also standing before the bar but with his head in a guilty bow) and that the Judge should be lenient with the kid and not take his driver's license away.

Just about that time the Judge banged his gavel, said: "Fifteen dollars and costs, license revoked for thirty days." And I lost interest as somebody tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned around and found two hundred pounds of beef with a deputy bailiff's badge staring at me.

"Traffic violation?" he wheezed at me.

I nodded and showed him my ticket.

"First violation?" he asked, wheezing again.

"That's right. Where do I pay?"

He hadn't looked at the ticket yet, but lumbered a little sideways and pointed at a door at the rear of the courtroom. "In there. Get your sheet and line number and see the clerk at window four."

He started to hand the ticket back and then stopped. "Hold it. You'll have to see the Judge."

"What for? I'll plead guilty."

He waved a beefy hand at the ticket. "Yuh got section 48 and 49 on yuh, bud. That's why. The Judge sees all reckless drivers."

He finished it up with a leer that

only added a few more jowls to his chin. I didn't argue with him. I'd seen enough of ward heelers with badges on their shirts to know it wouldn't do any good. A five spot might have, but I figured he had enough pork in his barrel already. I could wait.

I turned away and put the ticket back in my pocket. I picked one of the back benches and sat down—hard. Probably the only padding in the place was in the deputy bailiffs' pockets. The bigger boys could always count on City Hall.

Up front the Judge was busy lecturing to a downcast negro who apparently had hopped a ride in a car that had been driving itself down the street when he found it and had of its own accord violated all the sections in the City Traffic code and probably a few more that weren't there besides. If I had been sightseeing it might have sounded funny, but from where I was sitting, waiting my turn, it didn't bring even a chuckle.

"Ahmmm."

Somebody cleared a throat beside me and I looked up. It was the lawyer in shirtsleeves, the guy who had won a case for the city just a few minutes ago.

"I take it you have a serious traffic violation against you, sir?"

He belonged on the stage, this guy. In the back with a broom in his hand. I ignored him with:

"I've got a traffic violation, yes."

"Ahmm. Allow me to introduce myself. Terrence Brody, Attorney-at-law. For a small fee I'll use my influence with the Judge. . . . He's in a rather bad humor today."

He had his fingers hooked back into his belt and had that lofty look on his pan that told me I was in a bad spot and I had better take his advice or

suffer the untold agonies of judicial torture. If I had had a lot of dough to waste, and if I hadn't seen him in operation I might have given him half a thought.

"Sorry, Mr. Brody, I'm pleading guilty."

This he didn't expect. He took another hitch in his belt and stuck his jaw out.

"Do you know the maximum penalty that can be fixed on you? Do you know—"

"I know that I'm guilty, I'm pleading guilty, and I'm as guilty as the day you were born."

I turned away from him just as the Judge pounded his gavel, doled out a fine and the bailiff up front called:

"Frank Stevens!"

I got up from my bench and walked past Terrence Brody and he didn't say a word. I went all the way up and through a gate that squeaked and stopped in front of the Bench.

THE bailiff had handed the Judge a sheaf of interesting looking papers, a combination of reds, greens, and carbon yellows. I began to wonder if maybe Frank Stevens hadn't committed assault and battery, resisted an officer, and perhaps stolen a Squad Car in addition to what the ticket said.

"Frank Stevens?" the bailiff asked me.

"That's right."

"Raise your right hand."

I raised it and he spied the tell-the-whole-truth recipe and I swallowed it with a: "I do."

The Judge busied himself with my record and after a few moments looked down his nose at me.

"Mr. Stevens, you're charged with speeding and reckless driving on the Outer Drive. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty, your Honor."

He thought that over for a moment, continued to stare at me and for the first time I got a little queasy around the collar. It suddenly dawned on me what a risk I was taking.

"Your driver's license, Mr. Stevens."

I pulled Stevens' license from my coat pocket and handed it up to him. He took it and stared at it for awhile.

"I see you're from Delaware, Mr. Stevens."

"That's right, Your Honor."

"Visiting in Chicago?"

"Mostly on business."

"How do you like it here?"

I grinned at him. "I like it fine, but I suppose the City doesn't."

He cleared his throat and for a moment I thought he was going to smile, but he didn't.

"Are you in the habit of driving over the speed limits in Delaware, Mr. Stevens?"

"I try not to, Your Honor. . . . I suppose I was too busy giving the city the once-over and didn't watch my speedometer. Chicago has a beautiful skyline, I'll have to admit that."

This time he did smile. He knew it was a lot of baloney and he knew that I knew it. I think I gained a point. I watched as he fastened his eyes back on the papers and kept my fingers crossed.

"Since you are an out of state visitor, Mr. Stevens, and don't know our traffic regulations too well, I'm inclined to be lenient." He cleared his throat and added: "But I cannot entirely excuse the negligence you showed in your admiration of our city." He let that one sink in and I had a hell of a time holding a smile back. The old duck was on the ball and seemed to be enjoying it.

He pounded his gavel. "Ten dollars and costs."

I watched as the bailiff reached over and took the driver's license and the rest of the papers. Then I followed him through the squeaky gate and to the rear of the courtroom and a small half-raised window. The bailiff shoved the papers through the window, said a few words to somebody inside, and stalked pompously away.

"That'll be eleven dollars."

I looked through the window and saw a pint-sized guy with a bald head and an embroidered badge on his gray jacket that read: *Clerk Of The Municipal Court*. I pulled eleven bucks from my wallet, shoved it through the window, watched him put a big red stamp on the papers, and then picked up the driver's license.

"Is that all?" I asked him.

"For this time, yeh." He said, not even bothering to look at me. So I turned to walk out of the place and back to Lila.

"Just a moment, please."

I WAS almost to the door. I stopped, turned, and looked into a pair of beady black eyes. I seemed to remember seeing the guy in one of the back rows of the court among the other spectators, but couldn't be sure. I hadn't paid anybody particular attention. But I did now.

He was dressed in a light palm beach suit and seemed clean-cut. He looked out of place, but for that matter I felt that way too.

"Yes?"

"You are Frank Stevens?"

Something warned me. A little feeling that I couldn't explain, but it was there. "That's right."

"You told the Judge you were from Delaware."

He didn't ask it like a question and I didn't like it for that reason. I didn't like the look on his face either. He

wasn't smiling—he probably never had; it was the sort of cold look you give a fish that has been silly enough to play with your bait. I had to say yes, so I said so.

"Come along with me, Mr. Stevens."

Just like that. Come along with me. "Who the hell are you? I've just paid my fine."

"I'm not talking about your fine, Mr. Stevens. We'll take the elevator."

He flipped open the left lapel of his palm beach coat and I saw a nice shiny little badge staring me in the face. I could feel my toes congealing, and I didn't know why.

"Mind telling me what this is all about? I'm in kind of a hurry, I've got an appointment, and—"

He came about as close to smiling as he probably ever would. It wasn't exactly a smile at that. Just a little crinkle of his lips that might just as well have been a leer.

"Your appointment will have to wait. I'm from the State's Attorney's office."

That was supposed to tell me a lot. "I'm sorry, but I don't know anyone in the State's Attorney's office. I've just been in Chicago for a short time and—"

He cut me off again and motioned to the door.

"We'll talk about it downstairs in the Detective bureau."

I didn't like him. I didn't like his manner, or anything about him. But right then the thing I liked even less was the way I was throwing Frank Stevens' name around. That funny feeling started to grow but there was nothing I could do but carry the ball awhile. If things got too hot I could always toss it away.

"O.K., but you're making a mistake. And remember, I don't have too much time to waste."

He didn't say anything but mo-

tioned me toward a waiting elevator. I followed him inside and I noticed he stayed close to the doors. Maybe I was supposed to make a mad dash for it and end up with my guts running down a sewer after a blaze of gunfire. It sounded funny that way, and that was what I needed. Hell, this joker didn't have anything on Stevens. How the hell could he? It would be fun having the last laugh.

The elevator stopped at the third floor and we got out. He led the way to a glazed glass door with the black letters: DETECTIVE BUREAU painted across it. He opened it and motioned me inside.

There wasn't much to see. It was a small bare room with two doors on either side. One of the doors said: *Lt. Ryan*, the other was unmarked. In front there was a high wooden counter and a swinging gate that probably squeaked. Behind the counter there were a couple of battered desks with beat-up swivel chairs, and a couple of plain clothes boys with their feet hitched over the edges of the desks.

"Ryan in?"

One of the dicks nodded to the State's Attorney man. "Sure, Ed, you got something on your mind?"

Ed pointed to me. "Meet Frank Stevens—from Delaware."

FOUR feet hit the floor and a silence reached out and hit me in the face. I didn't know which one to stare at first and all the indignation I'd been storing up let go.

"I don't know what kind of a gag this is, but up to now I've tried to play your little game and I'm getting tired. Just what makes me so interesting?"

One of the dicks turned to the S.A. man and did a good job of ignoring me. "The Delaware Stevens? You're sure,

Ed?"

Ed pushed the gate open. "That's what I want to see Ryan about."

I was getting mad fast but I knew enough about cops to keep it to myself. I put on my best bored expression and waited as one of the dicks opened Ryan's door and went inside. He was gone only a few seconds and then he was motioning to Ed.

"Come on in."

Ed touched my arm politely and I walked through. He left the gate swing shut after him and sure enough it squeaked. The dick stepped aside and I walked into Ryan's office.

There wasn't much to see here either. Drab walls with a dirty window facing State street, a desk with a glass top and in pretty fair shape, a few chairs, and Ryan.

He was sitting behind the desk and tapping a pencil on the glass top. He could have been a tall man from the way he was sitting, and from the way he looked he was probably a hard man. There was just enough hair on his head to put him around forty, and his face was a cop's face. Only his eyes made him different. They were wide and deep-set and were riveted to mine.

Behind me the S.A. boy said: "I thought you better take a look at him before I take him over to Cooper. I caught his name up in the traffic court, and when he told the Judge he came from Delaware I thought I had something."

Ryan nodded, still looking at me.

"Sit down, Mr. Stevens."

I picked out a chair and sat down. I decided that now was as good a time as any to ask a few questions of my own.

"Up until now I've been pretty patient, Lieutenant. Just why am I getting the rush act around here?"

He smiled and stopped tapping the pencil. "Nobody's trying to inconvenience you, Mr. Stevens. All we want is a little information which you may be able to give us."

"How can I give you any information? I've only been in Chicago for a short time and outside of the traffic violation I just paid—"

"You have only been in Chicago for a short time?"

"That's right."

"About how long would you say you've been here?"

I kept my mouth shut for a few moments. This whole thing didn't make sense. What the hell difference did it make how long Stevens had been in town? I could see he was waiting for an answer.

"A few weeks."

He nodded politely. "And before you came to Chicago you were living in Delaware?"

I had to guess at that one but there seemed to be only one logical answer. "I was."

"And your wife is in Chicago with you?"

So he knew Stevens had a wife. That told me a lot more than he thought it did. How did he know Stevens had a wife if he wasn't looking for Stevens? Something cold hit me in the stomach then. I thought of Lila and her traffic ticket. Had she been afraid to come down here herself? . . .

"I asked you if your wife was in town with you."

"Yes, she is." My voice was steadier than it should have been. "And now that you have your information, I'd like to know just what business it is of yours?"

He didn't smile. He just stared at me. "It really isn't any of my business, Mr. Stevens, but the State of Delaware sent us a little information

about you."

He stopped, waiting. I suppose I should have turned white at that and started pleading for leniency.

"And what does Delaware want with me, lieutenant?"

He shrugged, as if the matter didn't really concern him very much. "Just one of those little exchange bulletins on fugitives, Stevens. We get them all the time from all over the country. It kind of keeps us on our toes watching for you guys. . . . Yours? Just a little case of murder."

He turned away from me then and started talking to the State's Attorney man. What he was saying I didn't hear. The only thing I heard was *just a little case of murder. Murder!*

"—and you might as well take him over to Cooper since this is a state job. I'll lend you one of my boys, just in case."

Somebody had hold of my arm and was pulling me to my feet. It was one of the dicks who had been standing by the door. I couldn't see his face very clearly because my head was spinning suddenly with a picture of Lila's face. I didn't like the way she was laughing at me.

CHAPTER III

"THAT'S very interesting. So now you're trying to say your name is not Stevens."

I was sitting in a large oak paneled office in the Criminal Courts building. I was sitting in a comfortable leather chair in front of a clean glass topped desk. There were four other people in the room besides myself. One of them was Ed whose face I had come to love; one was a middle-aged stenographer who was seated a few feet away from me busily scratching short hand notes with a bored look on her bored face;

one was a uniformed cop who stood close to the door, shuffling his feet every once in awhile as if he had corns, and in front of me, across the desk, a lean small man with grayed hair and squinting black eyes whose name was Cooper and who seemed impressed with the fact that he was the State's Attorney.

"That's exactly what I do mean, Mr. Cooper. My name is not Stevens. I'm James Marks."

He leaned back in his chair and said something to his assistant, Ed. Ed started recounting exactly where and how he had found me. He even had our conversation down to a T. I had to hand it to him.

Cooper nodded finally and turned back to me. "You walked into the traffic court with a speeding ticket. You presented yourself before the Judge as Frank Stevens. You had a driver's license made out in Frank Stevens' name," he waved it at me as exhibit A, "and now your name is suddenly James Marks. You can prove all this of course?"

I nodded. Up until now I had been able to keep Lila out of this, but a traffic ticket is a far cry from a murder rap. "I can prove it."

He didn't say anything and for a moment the stenographer's pencil stopped scratching. They were all waiting for me. That was all right. I had carried the ball long enough.

"I admit I went to court under the name of Stevens, but I was only doing it as a favor for a friend."

Cooper's eyebrows did some arching and at that I couldn't blame him. "And just who is this friend?"

"His name is Frank Stevens—the same name I used in court."

"Why did Mr. Stevens tell you to come in his place?"

"I, . . . it wasn't Stevens himself . . ."

"Oh? I thought you just said you were doing him a favor."

I felt myself flushing and I couldn't blame my face for it. The way Cooper was talking I knew he didn't believe me. There was nothing to say except:

"His wife told me to do it. Lila is an old friend of mine, and—"

"And why didn't Frank Stevens pay his own fine?"

"I believe he's out of town."

"You believe?"

"Lila said he was."

"Where—out of town?"

"I don't know."

"On business?"

"That's what she said."

"What kind of business?"

"I, I don't know that either."

"You don't know very much about Frank Stevens, do you?"

There wasn't any smile on his face. I could tell from his eyes that he was getting tired of my kind of talk. He moved around in his chair and tapped a pencil on the glass topped desk.

"You claim your name is Marks?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"What's your occupation?"

"I'm a free-lance writer for sports magazines."

"You live in Chicago?"

"I don't have any permanent address. I move from one resort spot to another. I have to in my business."

"Spend much time in Delaware?"

". . . I've been there, yes."

HE NODDED his head and glanced over at Ed. I pulled out a handkerchief and wiped my forehead. I was sweating and it wasn't from the heat.

"These magazines you write for, you know the editors personally?"

Somehow I knew he was going to ask that question and I knew that my answer would be just what he wanted.

"No, I do all my business by mail."

He nodded again and his pencil kept on tapping. "Your closest relatives, where do they live?"

"I, I don't have any. My parents died when I was fifteen and I've more or less shifted for myself. Look here—"

He stopped me with his hand. "I'm asking the questions. You just answer them. . . . Do you have any friends in Chicago?"

I shook my head no.

"Do you have any close friends *anywhere*?"

"I told you before I move around a lot. You can't make many close friends that way."

"In other words, you say your name is James Marks, and yet you can't prove it."

I had him there. "I told you I could prove it. Call Mrs. Stevens at the Sheridan Arms Apartments."

That was that. Lila was thrown into it and I suddenly didn't give a damn. It was her fault I was sitting where I was. I watched Cooper reach for his telephone.

They let me smoke while we waited, and that was all we did. It was a solid half hour of waiting and the silence got on my nerves. They all sat there and kept staring at me. I got the funny feeling after awhile that maybe Lila had left town too. Then I heard the door open behind me and felt better.

I turned my head to watch Lila come in, and then I sat straight up in my chair. A cop was leading a nervous guy into the room, and as I looked at the guy's face, I had the funny feeling that I had seen him some place.

Then I had it. The hotel. The clerk behind the desk—the guy who had been reading the *New Yorker* when I walked in . . .

I became aware that Cooper was

watching my face and I settled back and tried to stop the throb in my throat.

Cooper motioned the clerk to a chair close beside me. I watched him sit down and stare at me. There was a haughty look in his eyes that told me a lot.

Cooper asked him: "You're the desk clerk at the Sheridan Arms Apartment Hotel?"

The guy looked over at Cooper and nodded.

Cooper nodded back and pointed to me. "You've seen this man before?"

The guy looked back at me and sniffed. "I have. He's Frank Stevens. He joined his wife at the hotel today."

"That's a lie!" I snapped. "I never told you my name was Frank Stevens!"

The guy looked over at Cooper and shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, he's Frank Stevens. I asked him if he was Mrs. Stevens' husband."

Cooper nodded again. "He didn't deny it?"

"No. Why should he?"

I turned to Cooper. "Listen, I never told this jerk my name was Stevens! I told you to get Lila down here!"

Cooper motioned to the cop standing behind the clerk's chair. The guy got up and followed the cop from the room. I kept watching the open door and I wasn't surprised when Lila walked in.

She stopped just inside the door, looking around. She didn't have to look far to see me and I got to my feet.

"Lila! Christ, am I glad to see you!"

She came toward me then, her blue eyes wide with concern. "Frank! What's happened? When the police came and told me you were here . . ."

I sank back into my chair in a wet heap. I knew my mouth was open because it took me some time to get my teeth back together. I cleared my throat and my voice was hoarse.

"For God's sake, Lila, cut the act!

These boys have something on your husband that I don't want any part of! Tell them the truth—tell them my real name!"

She looked over at the State's Attorney and then back at me. "Frank! What are you talking about? Tell them what?"

"Tell them what! Goddammit, Lila, I said to cut the act! There's a murder rap on your husband!"

SHE opened her mouth as if she were going to say something, and then clamped her teeth tightly together. A look of surprise and alarm twisted the corners of her mouth, and her cheeks reddened as though someone had just slapped her.

"Frank!" she breathed the word out.

I got out of my chair again and started toward her. It was too much for me. I didn't get it. I didn't get any little part of it and I wasn't sure I wanted to anyway. All I knew was that someone was trying to wrap a rope around my neck and from where I stood it looked like Lila. I don't know whether I loved or hated her the most at the moment.

"Sit down, Stevens!"

I heard the voice crack out behind me and knew it was Cooper. But I wasn't in any mood for sitting down. I was going to shake words out of Lila right then if I had to reach into her throat and get them myself.

Somebody grabbed my arm and twisted me around and shoved me backwards. I caught at the edge of the desk and fell against the chair I had been sitting in. When I got back to my feet a cop was standing in front of me and he had a .38 special in his hand, motioning me to sit down. I sat.

"Mrs. Stevens," I heard Cooper talking as if nothing had happened, "this man says his name is not Frank Stev-

ens. He says he is James Marks and that he was doing a favor for your husband in coming to court. Is this true?"

I looked back at Lila, waiting. This was her last chance. Either she came across now, or—

"I don't understand this at all!" Lila said, wide-eyed and nervously. "Why should Frank tell you a story like that?"

"I take it, Mrs. Stevens, that you mean that this man is your husband?"

She looked once at me. Just once. What I saw in her eyes I didn't understand. There seemed to be fear there, and a plea . . .

"Of course he's my husband. . . . Frank, darling, why did you say your name was Jim Marks?"

I tried to get to my feet again but the cop shoved me back. I shouted at her.

"Lila—didn't you hear what I said? There's a murder rap waiting for Frank! For God's sake tell the truth!"

I don't know whether she would have answered or not. Cooper ignored me and asked a question himself.

"Mrs. Stevens, you do know a man named Marks?"

Lila nodded at him and her features began to pale, as if she first realized that something serious was going on. "Yes—Jim Marks is an old friend, a writer. —What does Frank mean by a murder rap?"

Cooper leaned forward across his desk. "Do you mean to say that you don't know that your husband killed a man in Wilmington, Delaware?"

Lila took a step backward. "*Killed* a man? But that's impossible!"

Cooper snorted. "The Delaware authorities don't seem to think so."

"But *who* is Frank accused of killing?"

This I was interested in myself. I

watched Cooper turn and look at me.

"George Dagano. Do you remember names any better, now, Stevens?"

The name meant about as much to me as his dirty laundry. I told him so and asked him who the hell Dagano was.

He shrugged. "Dagano was a big time racketeer. Maybe he was getting too big. Care to talk now, Stevens?"

I told him what he could do and the cop in front of me slammed a fist in my mouth. I heard Cooper say:

"Getting cute won't help you any, Stevens. If this were my case you'd talk . . . I'm holding you for extradition, and I'm sure the Delaware police will be able to refresh your memory."

The cop had a hold on my arm and was jerking me to my feet. I tasted blood in my mouth but somehow it didn't matter. All I could see was Lila, and I couldn't even see her very well.

"Oh, Frank, Frank darling! . . ." She was crying, and holding her arms out to me. But that was all I saw as the cop shoved me through the door.

AS CELLS go, I must have rated pretty high. I had one all to myself, with three stone walls and a heavy barred door. There was a low metal bed clamped to the floor, with a mattress and two army blankets. A small wash basin and toilet occupied one corner, and outside of this I had the place all to myself.

I had a lot of time to think in the past few hours. And what I thought wasn't very pretty. That Frank Stevens had killed somebody I didn't doubt. That Lila knew about it I was equally certain of. But why she should do this to me I wasn't at all sure about. She said she loved me. She had said it in a way that a woman really in love would say it. And now she was trying to send me on a one way trip to the gallows.

Gallows . . . Yes, they hanged convicted murderers in Delaware. I could see a gallows with a taut rope and a body swinging at the end of it and it had my name written on it. *My name.* Christ, *why* was she doing it!

All that thinking wasn't getting me anywhere, but then I didn't have any place to go, and it was something to do. I began to know what a caged animal felt like, walking up and down, stopping before the barred door and looking out into the small dimly lit corridor outside my cell. I'd have given a lot to walk out of that place and into the cool clean outside world.

. . . I must have been sitting on the edge of the bed thinking, because I didn't hear anybody coming until a cop rattled keys in the cell door. I looked up and behind him I saw Lila.

I got to my feet and walked to the door.

"You've got just ten minutes, Mrs. Stevens," the cop said.

She walked inside and the cop closed and locked the door behind her. I was so surprised I didn't know what to do but just stand there looking at her. There were a thousand questions on my mind all at once, but I guess the look on my face told more than anything I could have said.

"Jim!" she whispered, pushing me back toward the bed and the corner of the cell. "Jim, don't look at me like that . . ."

I sat down and a soft hand reached out and closed over mine. I pulled my hand away.

"So you've finally remembered my name."

"Jim! Please, Jim, don't hate me like this . . ."

"What do you expect me to do, stand up and cheer?"

"... You do hate me."

I looked away from her eyes. They

were doing things to me even though they were the same eyes that had put me in this cell. "I didn't say I hated you."

She reached out again with her hand and I stood up and looked down at her.

"Maybe you didn't say it, but I can see it on your face."

I laughed at that. "How do you expect me to look when the woman I love uses me to protect a man accused of murder?"

"But Jim, Frank didn't do it!"

"That's very interesting. And what am I supposed to do about it, walk up thirteen steps and feel like a martyr?"

"Don't be silly, Jim. You know you're perfectly safe."

"Oh, yes, I'm perfectly safe. I'm so damned safe I can't even prove what my own name is! That's pretty funny, don't you think? As far as these cops are concerned I was born Frank Stevens and I'm going to hang as Frank Stevens. And you walk in as demure as all hell and tell me I'm perfectly safe!"

"Jim! Please sit down. I don't have much time, and there's so much to say."

"That's putting it mildly. The first thing you've got to say is that you're going to Cooper and tell him the truth."

HER eyes dropped and a little shudder swept through her body. Then it passed and she looked up at me again. "You've got to trust me, Jim. I admit that what I did this afternoon was pretty rotten, but I've got a very good reason—and if you really love me you'll believe me when I say that I'm doing it for us. . . ."

"For us?"

"Yes, Jim. I told you before that Frank is engaged in a very important business deal. If he was dragged into court now, for something he didn't do, it would all fall through. Don't you

understand? You've got to help!"

It was so funny that I couldn't laugh. I was trying to take a man's wife away from him and she seemed perfectly willing to come with me. And in order to do it I had to take a murder rap for him so I could be sent away and he could stay free. It was all very clear. She must have read it in my eyes.

"You're wrong in thinking what you are, Jim. Listen—all you have to do is let them extradite you to Delaware. Once you get there you'll be freed—they'll be able to identify Frank by photographs, and you certainly don't look like him! Don't you see—there's nothing to worry about!

"And by that time Frank will have his business finished and can straighten out this mess himself. But believe me, Jim, he is not a murderer, and you have nothing to fear. Afterwards I'll get a divorce, and you and I . . ."

She was talking me into a good case of hysterics. Right then I didn't know what to believe.

"Listen, Lila, I don't know what this is all about, but one thing I want to know. Just what is this business Frank is engaged in, and why is it so important to you that I've got to be a fall guy until he can find time to step in where his own shoes belong?"

She shook her head slowly. "I can't tell you that, Jim. I can't tell you because I don't know myself. I know you'll find that hard to believe too, but it's the truth . . . When this is all over we'll be together, we can go to Mexico or anywhere—wouldn't you like that?"

Wouldn't I like that. "Sure, I'd like that. I've got a million bucks to throw away on Cook's tours."

"But we'll have plenty of money . . ."

That rocked me. Money. I remembered how she had talked about it up in her flat. I remembered and now here it was again. I didn't like it.

"So it's money after all."

"There will be money, yes. But you know that isn't it."

"Then what is it?"

She didn't answer, but got to her feet and put her hands on my shoulders.

"One thing I must know, Jim. . . . Do you still love me?"

I looked into her eyes and saw little wet pools. Her lips were trembling and parted and I could feel her fingers tighten.

I knew what I was going to do and I did it.

I kissed her long and hard and told her: "Yes, I still love you. I'll probably still love you the day I die."

She shuddered in my arms and her voice was low in my ear. "Then promise me you'll do this for me. Promise that you won't let this stand in the way of our happiness. It will only be a few days. . . . Please, Jim."

Even if I had wanted to say no, I couldn't. And besides, what good would it have done me? I was tagged as Frank Stevens and I was going to stay Frank Stevens until I got to Delaware. But that made me feel a lot better and I knew that I should have thought of it before. Hell, they had nothing on me except a name, and as Lila said, once the Delaware cops saw my face . . .

"All right, Lila, I promise."

She cried into my neck as the cop came and rattled his keys in the lock. Then Lila kissed me again and I let her walk to the door.

"Goodbye, . . . Frank," she said.

I watched her disappear down the hall, watched the cop lock my cell door and follow her, and then everything was quiet.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the stone floor. It looked hard and cold. And suddenly I felt the same way. Somewhere in the past ten minutes, I knew, I had made a mistake.

But I didn't know what it was.

CHAPTER IV

HE WAS a great little talker, the guy I was handcuffed to. I knew his name was Chris Paddock, that he had a sweet little wife who worried about him constantly, and that he had two kids whom he worried about more than that. He talked for about fifteen hours, all the way into Philadelphia, and then he shut up only enough to transfer to another Pennsylvania train that shuttled between Philly and Wilmington.

He talked about his little white house with the garden in the back yard and how his tomatoes were getting ripe and he expected to can a couple of bushels at least. Of course, his wife was going to do most of the canning, but his job was taking care of the garden, and of course, that was the most important part of canning anyway. He also went into great detail explaining the Chris and Paddock in his name, feeling a little put out because his mother, whose grandfather had been a Swede, had tagged Chris on to an otherwise full-blooded Irish ancestry.

I also knew that he was going to be mighty glad to get back to Wilmington, as he didn't like the West, and that he felt very sorry for me, but I should have known better to do what I did.

The car we were now riding in wasn't very crowded, which was all right with me, since it made that many less people to stare at me and the handcuffs. And I hoped that Paddock would like to spend a half hour or so in thought, because I wanted to myself.

I had the seat by the window and was watching the telephone poles sliding past when Paddock started up again.

"Yes sir, Stevens, I'm glad we're on the last lap. Be in Wilmington in about

a half hour. Yes, sir. . . . You really led us a merry chase—all the way to Chicago. You know, if you hadn't gone to pay that traffic fine you might have gotten away with it. Yes, sir, when we don't have even a photograph to go on it can be pretty tough. But all you guys make at least one little mistake. Yes, sir."

I was watching the telephone poles and I guess it didn't hit me right away. He started talking again but then suddenly what he had just said found a hole in my subconscious. "*When we don't even have a photograph to go on . . .*"

I got a very uncomfortable feeling around my collar. Only it wasn't my collar—it was a rope. A rope with a noose and it was getting tighter. *No photograph, no photograph, no—* A great big black cloud started lifting somewhere inside my head. I saw a sweet smiling face with a lot of blond hair framing it like a gold halo. Only now it didn't seem to be much of a halo to me, and the face wasn't very sweet any more. It was Lila. Lila who had talked me into taking a murder rap. Lila who had talked me into taking a little trip to Delaware where I wouldn't have to worry because once I got there the police would look at Frank Stevens' photograph and say with a big laugh and a bigger apology: "Sorry, old man, but we can't hang you today—you're not Frank Stevens."

Oh, yes, it was a very clever little thought, that one. Photograph. There wasn't any photograph. There had never been a photograph. *And Lila had known it all along!*

"One thing about Delaware, Stevens," I heard Paddock chirping along. "We give our customers fast service. Yes, sir, mighty fast. Wouldn't be surprised if your trial was over in two weeks."

TWO weeks. Two weeks to put a rope around my neck and tighten the noose. It wasn't very long to wait . . . I straightened in my seat and looked out the window at the rolling countryside as it sped past me. It looked nice and peaceful out there. Nice and peaceful and free. Free. . . I knew then that I couldn't wait two weeks.

"Paddock, I've got to use the john."

He grunted and got to his feet. The handcuff tightened around my wrist for a moment as I got up following him, and then we walked down the aisle toward the smoker. A few people were staring at me, I knew, but I didn't really notice it right then. I had something else on my mind.

There was only one guy in the smoker. He was standing before one of the wash basins and combing his hair. I saw his eyes travel over us as we came in and I could see the surprise register in them as he saw the metal bond between me and Paddock. Paddock let me move ahead of him so his body blocked off the curtains and then he fished a key out of his coat pocket.

I waited while he unsnapped the cuff from my wrist and then his hand went back into his coat pocket and stayed there. I knew his fingers had closed around a gun but I didn't mind.

"Hurry it up, Stevens, we'll be coming into Claymont pretty quick."

I nodded and opened the toilet door. As I went inside I could hear the guy who had been combing his hair clear his throat nervously. I gathered he didn't like the idea of a criminal being free in the same room with him. I was glad he felt that way and hoped he would leave.

I stood inside the door and waited for a few minutes, listening to the *clickety-clack* of the wheels. It's a funny thing about train wheels. You can make

them rhyme with any song you want or any thought. They'll even repeat names for you, like they were doing for me right then. *Clickety-Lila—clackety-Lila—clickety-clackety-Lila.*

I should have been very nervous. I felt like I wanted to shake all over. But somehow I didn't. It had to be done. It was my only way out.

I opened the door. Paddock was standing just inside the curtained entrance, alone. The other guy had gone. That was nice.

I walked out and over to one of the wash basins. I pushed the plunger down and squirted warm water into the bowl. In the mirror I could see Paddock watching me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the towel rack with its neat stack of Pullman specials.

I used a lot of soap on my hands and then washed my face. I did a good job of it, probably the best job I had ever done. Then I flooded the soap off with the warm water and started groping around, my eyes shut.

"Mind handing me a towel, Paddock?"

I let my eyes squint open a little and saw him move forward and flip a towel from the rack. In that tiny instant his eyes were off me.

He didn't have a chance. I hit him in the side of the head with my fist as hard as I could. His body teetered off balance and his head slammed against the metal wall beside the toilet door.

He tried to pull his hand out of his pocket as I hit him again. My knuckles caught the point of his jaw and he sagged limply, a little grunt of pain whooshing from his mouth.

That was all. It hadn't taken more than fifteen seconds. He was flat on the floor and out cold. And then I started to shake.

I got down beside him and watched my trembling fingers reach in his coat

pocket. Then I watched them pull out the .38 Special. They didn't seem to be my fingers. But the gun seemed to calm them down a little.

I had to work fast. Any second another guy might come barging in, and that would be bad. I lifted Paddock's shoulders and kicked the toilet door open with my foot. He weighed a lot, but I could have carried the Empire State building right then. I got him inside the toilet, resting his head up against the wall. A little blood was running down his temple where his head had hit the wall, and I felt sorry for him. This might mean his job. It might mean that his little white house and the garden would go up for hock. It might mean a lot of things to him. But it meant a lot more to me. Paddock didn't have a rope around his neck.

I shut the toilet door and looked at myself in a mirror. I didn't like what I saw there. The face didn't seem to belong to me. It was a strange face with hunted weary eyes. And behind those eyes a face was laughing—a face with blond hair and no eyes . . .

Somewhere in the car I heard the Conductor calling Claymont. That brought me back. I slid through the curtains and lurched in the narrow aisle as the train made a turn. Right beside me was the door to the outside platform. I twisted the handle as the Conductor's voice grew louder.

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack. The wheels rang louder out on the platform. I stood listening to them a moment, sweating, and my nerves jumping. All I had to do was open the coach door, hold my breath, and jump.

I did just that. The door swung open, a hot wind blew into my face, the ground looked up at me as it sped past, I held onto the hand rail for a moment and turned my body in the direction

the train was traveling, and jumped.

For some reason the ground looked a long way off.

CHAPTER V

I SAW the winking a long way off.

With dust in my eyes, brambles catching at my trousers, I was plodding through a briar patched field. Just one more field to the countless others I had stumbled through all afternoon. I knew I was a mess. I didn't have to look at myself to know that. I was dirty and tired and thirsty and hungry. Most of all I was hungry.

There it was, winking at me. T-H-E—R-O-A-D-S-T-O-P. Over and over in big red neon letters, flashing in the twilight, reaching out at me.

I spat some of the dust out of my mouth as I came to the edge of a highway. I stopped along the concrete and stared at the roadhouse not fifty yards from where I was standing on the other side of the road. It wasn't a very big roadhouse, but it spelled food and a place where I could get my bearings.

I started to cross the road and a pair of headlights cut through the gloom behind me. I jumped back. It might be a police car, and I didn't want any part of the police.

The lights caught up with me and zoomed past. Then the motor died down and brakes whined as the car pulled up beside the roadhouse.

I stood looking at it from my place in the shadows. It was a long low Lincoln Continental convertible. A red job that looked redder in the light of the roadhouse flasher. I saw a door open and a girl get out. Then the car door slammed behind her and she walked into the ROADSTOP. I let my breath out slow and easy.

I would be taking a chance in going across that road, I knew. Maybe there

were cops in the place. Maybe there were cops in every place on every highway in the state. Maybe I'd be walking right into their hands. Maybe. Maybe. All afternoon I'd been saying maybe. Every time I saw a road, a car, a house, even a barn, I'd said maybe. The hell with maybe. The hell with everything. A man had to eat to live. Even to die . . .

It wasn't a very large room and there weren't very many people in it. I could see three from where I was standing just inside the door. A bar ran along the far wall, and behind it a bartender was busy mixing a drink for a man sitting on a bar stool in front of him. He didn't seem to be particularly interested in anything except the half filled cocktail glass which he was holding and staring at. Six tables were spaced around the floor, all of them empty except one. The girl from the Lincoln Continental was sitting there smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper on the table in front of her. It looked pretty good to me; everybody minding his own business and nobody even giving me so much as a glance. I walked casually between the tables, past the girl and to the men's room at the rear. I not only felt dirty, I was dirty.

I hung my hat on a hook and used plenty of soap and water. I followed that up with a comb and when I looked into the mirror I was surprised to see my own face staring back at me. There wasn't very much I could do about my clothes except beat the dust out of them, and pick out the brambles sticking to my trousers. After that it was just a couple of steps to the door, so I took my hat off the wall hook and walked into the other room.

THINGS hadn't changed very much. The guy was still sitting at the bar,

only this time he had a full glass in front of him. The bartender was busy with a towel, and the girl was still reading her newspaper. I picked out a table in the corner of the room and sat down, giving the barkeep a sign. He nodded at me, turned around and pressed a button at the back of the bar, then went back to wiping his glasses. A few seconds later a door at the end of the bar opened and a woman carrying a tray of food came out and headed for the girl's table. I watched her put the food down and my stomach told me I had better get something into it in a hurry.

The girl folded up her paper and started to work on her steak sandwich as the waitress crossed over to my table.

"Yes sir?" she asked me.

"That steak sandwich looks pretty good to me," I told her. "I'll take it."

She nodded. "Coffee?"

I nodded back. "Bring the pot along with you."

She seemed to take this as a joke and laughed a bit as she turned back toward the kitchen. I settled back in my chair and lit a cigarette. The smoke tasted good but that's as far as it went. I wasn't feeling very good. I was feeling lousy. This was about the first time I had been able to think in so many hours I couldn't remember them all. What I thought wasn't nice, but then nothing that had happened to me lately had been very nice either. I kept asking myself a question. "Well Mac, where do we go from here?" It was a good question but unfortunately I didn't have the answer. There was only one thing I was certain of. In a very short time there would be a drag-net out, maybe there was one out already. And what could I do about it? Could I go anywhere? Could I see anybody? Were there any caves

around I could crawl into? I still had a little money in my pocket but not enough to keep me going very long. Anyway money wasn't what I needed. I knew what I needed. I needed a guy named Frank Stevens. A guy whose name I had adopted, and all through the generosity of a woman I trusted. Lila. Yes I'd like to see Lila just about now. I didn't know what game she was playing but whatever it was I knew I was the fall guy. It's nice to have a woman think that much of you.

I thought a little bit about Chris Paddock. In a way I felt sorry for the guy. A sweet little wife, two kids, and a white house with a garden and the wrath of the Delaware police falling on his shoulders. And all over me. Well, times were tough all over. But mine were a lot tougher than his. In a way he had it coming though. I was the sucker to whom he had given an even break. It would teach him a lesson. I was feeling mighty generous.

I felt somebody looking at me. It was one of those feelings you really don't feel—you just know. I turned my head and looked into a pair of the biggest, bluest eyes I ever saw. Around the eyes there was a face I hadn't taken much notice of before. It was a face worth remembering. It didn't have the soft angelic contours of Lila's face—the kind of a face that made you want to walk around on your knees—it was the kind of face that told you if you got too close to it you'd get into a lot of trouble. It was the kind of face that could love or hate with equal intensity.

Her lips were full and curved down slightly at the corners. They were parted now and I could see a flash of white even teeth behind them. Around all this was a wealth of brunette hair that rested lightly on her shoulders. I

thought that with a little bleaching she could have passed for Veronica Lake, or on the other hand, if her nose had been a little longer—Lauren Bacall. And yet she wasn't like either of them.

SHE must have known I was giving her the once over but she didn't seem to mind, because she seemed to be doing the same thing to me. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe she did that to every man she saw sitting at a table close to her. Or maybe it was because I looked like I had just crawled out of a gravel pit.

She wasn't smiling, just looking. But she was worth looking at too, so I didn't mind.

She turned her eyes away as the door at the end of the bar opened and the waitress came back in carrying my tray of food. I leaned forward and waited as the steak sandwich slid in front of me and from that time on my attention was riveted to a knife and fork.

I was about half through with my meal when I looked up, saw the girl fold her paper, put it under her arm, pay her bill at the bar, and walk out the door. I was on my second cup of coffee.

. . . I closed the door of the Road-stop behind me, lit a fresh cigarette and drew in some cool evening air. I felt a little better now. The food had done that. It had also cleared a few things in my mind. Things that had been bothering me. For one thing I knew where I was going. Frank Stevens was wanted for murder in Wilmington, Delaware. I was in Delaware. To all intents and purposes I was Frank Stevens. I was also as far as I could judge not more than twenty or thirty miles from Wilmington. That seemed to be the place my troubles had started so why not go there? It would probably be the last place the cops would

expect to find me. In the meantime maybe I could find out a few things for myself.

I started for the highway where I could keep in the shadows in case a car came along. That was one thing I couldn't trust. A truck possibly, but not a car. Cars have a habit of having cops riding in them and a cop was about the last thing I wanted to see.

I had my choice of directions. I could go either way along the highway, North or South. I had just made up my mind about South when a horn blared somewhere ahead of me in the darkness and a pair of headlights flicked on and off.

I stopped, with my heart beating a sharp staccato in my chest. Then the headlights went on again and stayed on. I saw a long sleek convertible and my mind started clicking. It was the Lincoln Continental.

A soft rich voice called out, "Can I give you a lift?"

I started moving again and came up slowly beside the car. She had the window on her side rolled down and was looking up at me.

"How far are you going?" I asked her.

"This is the road to Wilmington," she said.

"Are you going that far?"

"Yes. If that's where you're headed you'd better jump in. There won't be a bus along for quite a while."

I didn't know whether she was on the make or just trying to be kind hearted. But in either case it was an answer to my problem of transportation. "Thanks," I told her and walked around the car and got in beside her.

I settled back into some comfortable cushions as the car took off with a deep purr. She kept her eyes on the road and I kept mine on her.

"Do you make a habit of picking up

strangers?" I asked her.

I could see a smile tug at the corners of her mouth but she didn't turn her head. "Not usually," she said.

"What made me an exception?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just thought you might appreciate a lift."

"Thanks, I do. Do you live in Wilmington?"

"No, on the outskirts. My name is Toni Parker."

It was a nice name and it suddenly made me remember mine. "I'm Jim Marks," I said.

SHE didn't say anything, just kept her eyes on the road and her foot on the gas. It seemed to me that maybe it was a little too heavy on the gas. I glanced down at the speedometer and saw the red needle crawling toward seventy.

"Aren't you going a little fast?" I asked her.

The smile was back on her lips again. I was beginning to like that smile. "I always travel fast," she said, "I like things that way."

I could have taken that a number of ways but I didn't. I had problems enough on my mind as it was, and besides as far as women were concerned I wasn't in a trusting mood.

I settled back in my seat, content to let her run the show when suddenly something a long way up the road caught my eye and held it. It was a series of bobbing red lights in the middle of the highway, swinging back and forth. I felt a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead. It didn't take a genius to know what those lights were. It was a roadblock, and I didn't need three guesses to know what it was for.

In the same instant the girl started to slow down the car. I turned to her.

"Stop right here Miss Parker, I'm getting out now." I put my hand in

my coat pocket, my fingers closing around the thirty-eight I had taken from Paddock on the train. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it, even as a threat.

The car was barely crawling now and the lights were coming closer. I had my hand on the door and was getting ready to open it when the girl said: "You don't have to be afraid, Mr. Stevens, you're perfectly safe with me."

My hand froze on the door and I stopped thinking. I didn't have time to anyway. She was talking rapidly.

"Just lay back quietly and pretend you're asleep. Pull your hat down across your forehead. I'll handle this."

It was too late to do anything else. The roadblock was barely a hundred yards away and enough cops standing in the middle of it to let me know I wouldn't stand a chance if I made a run for it. I had a funny feeling as I slumped down into the seat and pulled my hat down over my eyes. Then the car stopped.

I heard footsteps approaching and then a gruff voice said, "Sorry to bother you, Mam, but we're checking all cars on this highway."

I heard Toni Parker say, "Is there anything wrong Officer? Shall I wake my husband?"

"I heard the cop say: 'That won't be necessary Mam. We're checking on hitchhikers. Did you notice any along the highway?'"

"No I didn't," the girl said. "But my husband and I never pick up hitchhikers anyway. You never can be sure one of them won't hold you up."

I HEARD the cop grumble something, but I wasn't sure what it was. A cold stricture had tightened around my throat and my head was pounding. Something kept telling me that it would never work. That cops were too smart.

But the funny thing was that this wasn't what was bothering me. I wanted to know why this girl who called herself Toni Parker had picked me up. I wanted to know why she had called me Frank Stevens—how she had known. I wanted to know why, if she knew I was Frank Stevens, an escaped murderer, she had put herself in a spot like this to save me from the police. It didn't add up. It didn't add up at all.

From somewhere, it seemed a long way off, I heard a voice say: "That will be all Mam, sorry we had to bother you. You can go on now."

From just as far off, it seemed, I heard the motor of the car pick up speed. It seemed like an eternity went by before Toni Parker said: "It's all right, Mr. Stevens. We've passed them."

I opened my eyes, turned, and looked out the rear window. The red lights of the roadblock were rapidly fading away. Then I turned to the girl.

"O.k., maybe we better do some talking."

She passed me a quick glance and then turned her eyes back to the road. She wasn't smiling. There was a tenseness around her mouth. "What will we talk about?"

"About me. How did you know my name was Frank Stevens?"

She took one hand from the steering wheel and reached down at the seat beside her. She handed me the newspaper she had been reading in the ROADSTOP.

"It's on the first page. Your picture and the whole story. I recognized you the minute I saw you back there . . ."

I didn't say anything. I picked up the paper and she switched on a dash light. There I was. As big as life. It was one of the pictures the cops in Chicago had taken when they moved

me to my cell in the county jail building. It wasn't a flattering picture, but it looked like me. And beneath the picture was the story of my escape on the train. It was all very vivid and exciting. I could see the circulation of all the Delaware papers going up over me. The whole story was there. How I'd been trapped in Chicago by an alert state's attorney's man, how my wife had identified me, and all the rest.

I put the paper down and looked back at Toni Parker. "All right, so I know how you recognized me. Now tell me why you went to bat for me."

"Don't you know?"

"Should I know?"

"I told you my name was Toni Parker."

"It's a nice name and I'm grateful for what you did but I still don't know."

"My Uncle is Jason Parker."

It was the way she said it that stopped me. The name meant nothing, but it was quite apparent that it should bring a sigh of relief from me. I just sat there, waiting.

"You took quite a chance in coming back like this. You might have led the police right to us."

"Us?"

Her lips tightened for a moment, then relaxed. "You might as well know it now, Mr. Stevens, I never wanted any part of the ring. It's no secret. My Uncle knows how I feel. . . . I didn't find out what you had him doing until it was too late."

"You didn't?"

"No, I didn't. All those parties you had my Uncle throw just to get photographs of the people after they didn't know what they were doing. . . ."

"And your Uncle?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about him. But I'm telling you now that I'm through. And you can tell Fred Brengle that too."

I COULD see her lips trembling a little as she said it. I got the impression that she was frightened at what she had said. But then the trembling stopped. I said: "I suppose they've all seen my picture in the papers by now."

She shrugged. "I suppose so. It's funny, isn't it? You managed to keep your own identity masked from everybody—even my Uncle—until you murdered George Dagano."

The first part of what she had said hit me the hardest. I didn't have much of an idea what she was talking about, except that she was mentioning people I should know very well, and who paradoxically didn't know me . . .

"You think I look like a murderer?"

Her eyes turned to me briefly but it was too dark to see them clearly. "I don't think it matters much what you look like. The facts speak for themselves."

"What if I told you I didn't kill anyone—even George Dagano?"

"Why would you tell me that?"

Her voice had a queer note to it and I decided I had better shut up before I said too much. A freak of providence had thrown this girl at me. She was a lead to people I wanted to find, who I might never have found if she hadn't seen my picture and identified me. I could wait. Things couldn't get worse.

"O.k., Toni," I told her. "But let's be friends. And drop this Mr. Stevens stuff. Until I get a better name you can call me Frank."

She looked slowly at me and then back at the road. "Maybe your wife wouldn't like that. . . ."

My wife. Yes, I had forgotten all about my wife. Good old Lila. "I don't think I give a damn what my wife thinks."

She didn't say anything. But she was thinking. What she was thinking

I didn't know, but I liked the way she looked. I was getting to like her more every minute.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

"To my place, of course."

Of course. Well, it was all right with me. The sooner I got to somebody who knew Frank Stevens, the sooner I'd get out of this. And one way or another I was going to see to that.

The .38 felt nice and comfortable in my coat pocket.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS a big colonial type house, the kind that George Washington might have slept in. It was nestled back amid a grove of tall poplars, well hidden from the gravel road that circled past it, connecting with the highway into Wilmington. In a way it was a lonely house, standing out in the countryside all by itself, but maybe it liked things that way.

Toni Parker pulled the Lincoln up in front of the house and turned off the motor.

"Nice place," I said.

She didn't say anything, but got out and stood waiting for me. There was nothing else to do so I got out too. I began to feel a little uneasy. From what the girl had said, I was going to meet some people who should be familiar to me in one way or another. Were they all friends? Thinking that nearly made me laugh. Friends were one commodity I was short of lately.

I followed her up the steps and waited while she got out a key. Then she opened the door and motioned me inside.

It was pretty big. There was a hall that could have passed for a small ballroom, with doors opening off of both sides all the way to the rear, and a grand staircase making a semi circle

to the second floor. A huge cut glass chandelier hung in the middle of the hall, and was lit, sending soft yellow light across the spotless glazed stone floor. My feet echoed hollowly as I walked on it.

The girl slammed the door shut behind her and the sound brought footsteps from somewhere in the rear.

Then a man came around the back of the staircase. He was dressed in tails and walked stiffly. He couldn't have been anything but a butler.

"Miss Parker, your Uncle has been worrying about you."

The girl sniffed. "I took a long drive, James. . . . Is Mr. Parker in the library?"

James nodded, glancing curiously at me. "Yes, Miss. Mr. Brengle is with him. Shall I—"

"Never mind," the girl told him, "I'll go on in." She nodded to me and set off toward two large sliding doors on the right side of the hall. I followed her, listening to the sharp little clicks her heels made, and liking very much the way she looked when she walked.

As she opened the doors I could feel the butler's eyes following me. He had a right to be curious, as I was curious myself. I followed the girl through the doorway.

I saw them as my eyes took in the room. It was large, as I expected, with thick carpeting running from wall to wall. Bookcases lined one side of the room, with a large flagstone fireplace at the far end. Bulky pieces of early American furniture rested uncomfortably around the room, and in two high wing-back chairs near the fireplace I saw them.

It wasn't hard to pick out the uncle. He was a short, stoutish man in his fifties, his hair thinning, and with thick glasses which sat on the bridge of his nose like nervous bugs. He was a man,

who, I judged, would be easily excitable.

Brengle was another matter. He was my height, about six feet, and had wide shoulders that probably had seen some football at one time or another. He was standing now, facing us as we approached, and I got a good look at his face. He was handsome in a dark complexioned way, with a long sensitive nose and sharp black eyes. He wore a trim black moustache that matched his hair, and I got the feeling that mentally he was always two jumps ahead of you.

I could see a sudden flicker of interest in Brengle's eyes as I walked up.

We stood that way for maybe ten or twenty seconds, nobody saying anything, and then Toni Parker said: "I found Mr. Stevens hitchhiking on the highway."

Just like that. I saw Jason Parker stare at me with bulgy eyes, as if he were looking at an apparition. But Fred Brengle laughed.

"So you're Frank Stevens. We finally meet."

I didn't have any answer for that except: "Looks like it, doesn't it?"

HE DIDN'T say anything, just kept looking at me with interest. I thought I could see laughter in the back of his eyes. A mocking laughter.

Jason Parker was spluttering something to the girl, the gist of which was where, how, and when had she found me, and why was I here.

I listened as the girl told him what he wanted to know and then I said: "Where else would you expect me to be? I'm with my friends—and incidentally, how are things going?"

Parker sat down heavily and fumbled for a cigar. He shook his head wearily. "You ought to know things aren't going right. It was all right as long as

you kept in the background. We had a perfect setup. Nobody knew you, not even any of us. But when you killed Dagano the boys were upset. Things have changed. You're a marked man."

That all sounded very funny to me. Funniest of all was the remark about nobody knowing Stevens. What was behind that? Just why didn't members of an organization that Stevens was apparently a vital part of know anything about him? I decided that there was only one way to play this.

"That's all very interesting, Parker," I said, "but just where do you think that leaves me?"

Parker didn't get a chance to answer. I saw him flinch, but he was interrupted by Brengle.

"Jason is naturally worried, Frank, but don't worry about a thing. You're still running the show."

I looked at Brengle and saw the laughter in his eyes again. Did he know something he was holding back? And where was all this getting me? So I was still running the show . . .

"What's happened since I've been gone?" I asked.

Parker sighed. "The boys have split up. Rigoni has most of them. I better tell you now that you better watch out for him. . . . What do you plan to do?"

I could tell by the way he said it that he didn't like the fact that I was in his house. Whoever this Rigoni was he had Jason Parker scared, and scared bad. I could see it in his eyes. I shrugged. "Take it easy for awhile. What else would you suggest?"

I watched Parker look over at Brengle for help. There was a smile on Brengle's face as he said: "You're perfectly right, Frank, the heat's on you so you better lay low. You'll be perfectly safe here with Parker."

Parker took a quick frantic puff at his cigar. "But the party tomorrow night! Won't it be risky? . . ."

Brengle looked steadily at me. "Maybe Stevens would like to handle this one personally. It should be a pretty big haul."

I had forgotten all about Toni Parker. She had been staying in the back-ground all during the talking, but now she walked up and stood a little to the right of where I was standing. She was trembling as she looked at her uncle.

"I told you I didn't want any part of this anymore! I'm sick of it, do you hear?"

I watched Parker suck nervously at his cigar and glance away as Brengle laughed. "The money has come in pretty handy hasn't it, Toni? All those pretty clothes and that flashy convertible!"

She turned, facing both me and Brengle. "I'm telling you all now that I'm through! I'm fed up with the whole rotten stinking mess! And maybe I won't mind telling the State's Attorney!"

She wheeled and went rapidly across the room to the door. After she had gone, Parker leaned forward in his chair. I could see beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Maybe she's right—maybe we should taper things off for awhile."

Brengle pointed a finger at him. "Don't give us any of that cry baby stuff, Parker. You're in this thing as deep as we are. Right, Stevens?"

I TOOK a long time in nodding. But I knew I had a part to play and it was too late to back out. "That's right," I said. Then I looked at Brengle. "What about Rigoni? You said he had pulled out . . ."

Brengle shrugged. "We don't need

him. Most of the boys went along with him but without us they can't do a thing. I know where to find him anytime we think it's necessary."

Parker wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "And he knows where to find us. If he knew that you were here, Stevens . . ."

"But he doesn't," Brengle interrupted. "Only the four of us do, and I'm sure none of us are going to stick our necks out."

Parker shook his head. "I'm worried about Toni. She's a high spirited girl. She may do what she threatens . . ."

"I'll worry about that," Brengle snapped. "Toni's smart enough to know she'd pull a rap too if anything went wrong."

Parker sighed and looked at the rug. "I should never have let her get into this . . ." He looked up at Brengle. "It was all your fault—meeting her in New York . . ."

Brengle walked over to a table and poured himself a drink. "This is no time for crawling. We'll have a haul tomorrow night that will set us up for quite awhile. I've had the suckers lined up for a couple of months. They've got the guage habit bad and are ready for picking. We can all take a nice long trip to Florida after this one . . ."

Parker nodded. "If the police don't trace Stevens here first."

"Quit your worrying. I'm getting sick of it. Things have worked out perfectly. Stevens is here, and safe." Brengle turned to me. "You know the setup," he smiled, "you should know it since you worked it out."

I nodded, remembering something Toni had said when we were driving up here. "You've got the cameras and everything all set?"

Brengle sipped slowly at his drink

and looked at me. ". . . That's right. Everything."

I walked over to the table and poured myself a drink. I needed it. "Then there's nothing left to discuss. . . . Any way I can get some clothes?"

Brengle looked me over. "That can be arranged. You're about my size and I've got a spare suit upstairs. I'll have James lay it out in your room."

I downed my drink. "I think I could use a room too. And a nice hot bath."

Brengle motioned to Parker and the fat little man sighed and pressed a button beside his chair.

Some of the tension started to ease up inside me.

CHAPTER VI

I HAD taken a long time in the tub. The water felt good and helped relax nerves that a little while ago had seemed about to explode. I finished shaving and was surprised to see that my face looked nearly normal. Even my eyes had lost that haunted look I saw in them at the *Roadstop*.

James, the butler, had laid one of Fred Brengle's suits on the bed, and a set of pajamas beside it. The pajamas looked good to me, and the bed better. I glanced at my watch. It was a little after 11:30. I could use some sleep.

The house was silent, and outside my window I could hear the chirping of crickets. A long way off a train whistle moaned and it made me think of Chris Paddock. I wondered how he was getting along.

I walked over to the bed and sat down, lighting a cigarette. Well, here I was. And right then everything started mixing around in my head. A few days ago I didn't have a care in the world outside of seeing one person—Lila Stevens. I had seen her. I

had seen her just long enough to get framed into the most beautiful setup a man ever walked into. A gallows was waiting somewhere here in Delaware for me. Me, Jim Marks, better known to the police and upper crust of the underworld as Frank Stevens. It was an impossible situation. You couldn't even read about something like this in a novel. People wouldn't believe it. Things like that just couldn't happen.

A man loses his identity, talked into it by a pretty face with blonde hair. I was the biggest sap on the face of the earth. I knew it. But that was just so much varnish now. But I was beginning to see through a little of the varnish. Enough to let me know that Frank Stevens was a bigshot in some vice ring. I knew that he had killed a man, a man named Dagano. Probably Dagano was getting too big for his shoes. And Stevens, playing it smart, stayed in the background all along, not letting anyone know who he was. But right there I stopped. That was as far as I could go. There was a big question that kept pounding in my head when I got that far. *How* could Stevens stay in the background? *How* could he operate a vice ring and not have any of his gang know him? It didn't add up. It wasn't possible. It couldn't happen.

And where did Lila fit into this? Was she on the inside? Was I just a convenient sucker that walked along and held out my hand for a murder rap? . . . Guage. That's what I had heard Brengle say. Guage. Short for marihuana. Good old marihuana, the viper's dream food. Where did that fit in? The party? It was no use. The more I thought about it the worse it got. Only a few things I knew. One: Frank Stevens was hiding out somewhere. I had to find him. Two: Stevens was the head of a vice ring

that was split up because of a murder. The murder of a guy named Dagano. Three: I was on the spot as Frank Stevens not only from the cops, but also from another member of Stevens' gang, a man named Rigoni. Four: There was going to be a big haul tomorrow night. I stopped there. Surely the real Frank Stevens wouldn't sit on the sidelines and let a big job be pulled off without getting a cut himself. That was my one hope. Stevens would have to show himself. He couldn't possibly know that I had showed up at the Parker house. If he was in Delaware he would have to get in touch with Parker. And that would be by tomorrow night. Twenty-four hours.

I PULLED the .38 from my coat pocket and held it in my hand. Well, if he showed up I'd have a few things to say myself. I put the gun in the coat pocket of the suit Brengle had loaned me.

I straightened on the bed as a door slammed somewhere along the second floor hall. Then I heard Fred Brengle's voice say sharply: "Just remember what I told you, Toni!"

Then silence. I started to get off the bed and then sat back. Someone was knocking at my door.

"Yes?" I asked.

"It's me, Brengle."

"The door's open," I said.

He came in smoking a cigarette and looking very smug. "Thought I'd like to talk over a cigarette before I turn in," he said.

I motioned to one of the chairs. "Sit down. I heard you down the hall."

He sat down and crossed his legs and looked at me over a smoke ring. "I was talking to Toni."

"So I gathered."

He let that one slip by and said: "She's a nice kid, but has a hell of a

temper."

I didn't have anything to say to that so waited.

"She seems to be attracted to you, Stevens."

I blew a smoke ring too. "That so?"

He nodded, not smiling. "It's a good thing you're a happily married man."

I didn't say anything to that either. It was his conversation.

"Toni's been acting strange ever since she brought you home this evening. Did you say anything to her?"

"About what?"

I could see I wasn't giving him the right answers. He shrugged. "I thought maybe you might have made a play for her . . ."

"You wouldn't like that?"

"I wouldn't."

"You're forgetting I'm a happily married man."

His lips formed the faint trace of a smile. "That's right, I did. How was Lila when you left her?"

"Worried."

He nodded. "I suppose she was. Women are always worrying—usually at the wrong time."

"Toni seems to be worried too."

"I can handle Toni."

I got the feeling that this conversation wasn't going right. As far as I knew I was supposed to be the big gun, with Brengle just one of my boys. But he was sitting here throwing a lot of brass around. I wondered just how much he wanted to throw.

"Just make sure you don't try to handle too much," I said.

He stopped smoking and stared at me for a long moment. Then he smiled. "You won't have to worry about that, Stevens. . . . Would you rather I step out and let you handle everything from here on in?"

It was the way he said it. A cold

sarcastic tone that implied: "Don't get too fancy with a murder rap over your head . . ." I could see that Brengle had big ideas for himself. Well, that was what I wanted to know. I got up.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep."

He shrugged and got up. I pulled a bathrobe from the back of a chair beside the bed and slipped it on.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

"Tomorrow will be a big day for all of us."

I opened the door and he walked past me and down the hall. I could see Toni's room at the opposite end. The door was shut and I watched Brengle glance at it before he went into his room a few doors past mine. And right then the thought hit me. Toni Parker was fed up with Brengle, her own uncle, and me, as Frank Stevens. She was in a mood to do something. And so was I. I might be taking a chance in going to her but the cards were already dealt and my hand couldn't be any worse.

I shut the door of my room and started to dress.

I DIDN'T hurry opening my door a half hour later. Brengle's clothes fit me almost as if they had been made to order. I had taken my time dressing, trying to figure just what I would do when the time came. It had come.

The hall was quiet, the lights out, only a single night light burning at the head of the stairs a short distance from Toni Parker's room. I closed the door to my room softly and walked quietly along the hall rug. I paused at her door but nobody seemed to be up. I knocked.

It wasn't a hard knock but it sounded very loud in that hall right then. I glanced over my shoulder expecting to see somebody look into the hall from

one of the other rooms, but nobody did.

I heard footsteps behind the girl's door and then it opened.

"Oh! It's you."

I motioned her to be quiet and slipped inside the door, closing it behind me. She stood staring at me, a little startled, and looking very pretty in a blue dressing gown. She had her hair combed out and it hung around her shoulders like a soft auburn halo.

"I'd like to talk to you, Toni," I said.

There was a mixture of emotions on her face. I could see that I had caught her by surprise, but more so, I noted a sense of relief. It was almost as if she had been expecting somebody else. I didn't need two guesses for that one.

"It's rather late . . ." she said.

I nodded. "I know it is, but what I have to say can't wait. By tomorrow things may bust wide open."

Her eyes frowned at me but she motioned me to a chair. I got a quick look at the room as I sat down, and it was every inch Toni Parker. There was a tall Elizabethan bed, a long three-mirrored dressing table, a chaise longue, two bureaus, and two stiff backed brocaded chairs, one of which I was sitting on. It was a patrician room, for a patrician person. It fit her just right, and I felt very comfortable.

She sat down on the edge of the chaise longue and pulled her dressing gown together hiding her knees. It wasn't an obvious coy gesture like Lila would have done, it was just a natural movement of hand and cloth. She said: "What do you mean about tomorrow, Mr. Stevens?"

I detected a note of coldness in her voice. And I wasn't very much surprised, considering what I had heard her tell everybody earlier in the evening, and after what Brengle had said. That was my main reason in doing what I was about to do.

I smiled at her. "I thought we dropped all the formalities, Toni."

Maybe her eyes wanted to smile, but her face didn't. "You know how I feel—if Fred Brengle told you to talk to me—"

"Brengle doesn't know I'm here. As a matter of fact I gather he wouldn't like it very well if he did know."

She lifted her head in what might have been contempt. "What Fred Brengle thinks I have no interest in."

I liked to hear her say it. It made things easier, and told me I had guessed right.

"One thing I would like to know," I told her, "is whether or not you meant what you said earlier tonight in the library."

"I meant every word," The coldness was back in her voice.

"Even if it means going to jail?"

"That's right. You see, Mr. Stevens, my mind is made up. You can go back to my uncle and Fred and tell them it is. I'm through."

This was what I had been waiting for. "All right, Toni, but one thing you have to get straight from now on is my name. I'm not Frank Stevens."

I guess it was the last thing in the world she expected to hear. It didn't take effect for a few seconds, but when it did her eyes widened and she sat a little straighter on the lounge.

"Is this some kind of a trick to—"

"Let me do the talking, Toni," I told her. "I said my name is not Frank Stevens, and it isn't. I'm Jim Marks."

She didn't say anything for a moment, but I could see her lips close tightly as she thought it over. "I'm afraid I don't understand . . ."

I got up and pulled my chair over beside the chaise longue. I didn't want to do any loud talking for anybody who might happen to pass outside her door. I leaned forward, my face close to hers

and told her the whole works.

I STARTED right at the beginning when I walked into Lila's apartment, and didn't stop until I got to the point where I knocked on her door. She didn't interrupt me once, but every now and then her eyes would widen as they always seemed to do when she was surprised at something, and gradually, as I neared the end of the story she was looking away from me and seemed to be studying the rug.

"So now you know the whole thing, Toni. Fantastic, isn't it?"

She looked up at me and I didn't see any coldness in her eyes now.

"I'm afraid I owe you an apology . . ."

"What for?"

"Well, I thought . . ."

I nodded. "You couldn't think anything else. And that's where my whole life seems to be goofed up. Everybody thinks I'm Frank Stevens."

She nodded her head slowly. "I see . . . Then that explains why Fred and my uncle took you in at face value."

"My picture in the papers helped," I said.

"Yes, that's true. . . . But where is the real Frank Stevens?"

"That's what I'd give five years of my life to know right now. And that's why I'm here holding on to his identity. He has to show sometime soon, and when he does . . ."

She frowned. "What makes you think he will?"

"From what I gather there's going to be a gathering here tomorrow night that will be a big haul. Stevens will want some of it. And that brings up a big question that's got me running in circles. Just what is this business all about that Stevens is running?"

She reached across to a small table beside the lounge and lifted a cigarette

from a white box. I took one myself and held a lighter to hers. She took a long pull at hers and blew the smoke at the ceiling. I waited.

"It isn't very nice, I can tell you that," she said. "I was actually working for Stevens and didn't know it. He controls the biggest dope ring in the East. His special hobby is getting prominent people addicted to various drugs, opium, marihuana, or cocaine, and then getting them in compromising circumstances where photographs are made. Then these people are forced to pay large sums of money in blackmail for the negatives.

"My uncle sent me to New York a year ago for a holiday. I had some papers along with me that he wanted me to deliver to Fred Brengle, who he said was a business associate of his. I was attracted to Brengle—one of those momentary flings that I suppose everyone has at one time or another—and he told me that as long as I was in New York on a holiday I should take in some of the parties they were throwing for business reasons. I didn't see any harm in it, and it seemed like a good way to help my uncle if could so I went.

"The parties were always lavish but I didn't know that anything funny was going on until one day when I was having lunch in one of the downtown restaurants a man came up to my table. I recognized him as one of the business men who had been at one of the parties. He accused me of being a member of a blackmail ring, showed me photographs that had been taken at the party with him and one of the girls there . . . and well, I just got up and ran out."

She paused and drew in again on her cigarette. I could see that she was nervous, just talking about it. I sat, waiting.

"I went to Fred Brengle and told him what had happened. He didn't

deny it, in fact, he made it quite evident that I was now a part of the ring. I went home to my uncle and told him he'd have to back out. For awhile I thought he would, but then this Frank Stevens stepped in. He got in touch with my uncle and told him that it was too late to back out and that he wanted to use me as a decoy for some prominent men he had picked out. I refused until my uncle made it plain that all of us would go to jail, and more so, that he was afraid Stevens might kill him.

"The rest is very simple. I've been part of the ring ever since, held by a threat, watching innocent men and women get tangled up in a foul business that milks them of every cent they own."

"And then the lid finally blew off?" I asked her.

SHE nodded. "Yes. It seems that a man named Dagano was getting ideas of his own and wanted to step in and take over. He had most of the men on his side, including a muscle man named Rigoni who took care of people who couldn't be intimidated by the threat of scandal. Stevens killed Dagano, and Rigoni let word get out to the police that Stevens was the murderer. Enough evidence fell into the hands of the police to prove it. But Stevens disappeared.

"That broke up most of the ring and I thought that finally it was all over. But Stevens got in touch with my uncle and Fred Brengle and Brengle came down here to Delaware. The plan was to run things here with Wilmington as headquarters."

"But I thought Dagano was killed in Delaware . . ."

She nodded. "He was. Stevens arranged a meeting of the key men in the ring here at our place. The whole thing was a plot to kill Dagano as it turned

out. He checked in at a hotel in Wilmington and the next morning was found shot to death in his room."

"Then the rest of the ring is still in New York?"

"As far as I know. That's why the party is being held here tomorrow night. This one is more Brengle's idea than Stevens', I'm sure, since Stevens has vanished. He has had a number of wealthy people on the string for a long time and wants to get them before it is too late."

Her voice trailed off and she sat studying her cigarette. That was all right with me right then. My mind was working back. I remembered a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes who put her arms around my neck and said she couldn't leave her husband until he settled a big deal. Oh yes, I remembered all right. It wasn't a very pleasant memory, but it was there. A big deal. It meant a lot to Frank. I'll bet it did. It meant a lot to Lila too. That told me one thing, that Frank Stevens *did* know about the affair planned for tomorrow night. It also told me that Lila expected Frank to be in on it. Well, that was just fine.

"Jim . . ."

I looked up from the rug where my eyes had been tracing a pattern with my thoughts. She was looking at me with half-closed eyes, soft and warm.

"Yes, Toni?"

"What are you going to do?"

Well that was a good question. "The only thing I can. Wait. Stevens is bound to show up. At least, that's what I'm gambling on."

"What if he doesn't?"

"I don't know."

"You can't run from the police forever."

"They're chasing me with a gallows."

"They're bound to catch you."

"Then I'll have to try and prove my

identity."

"Isn't there any way of doing it without all this?"

I ground out my cigarette in an ash tray. "I've been a howling success so far."

She reached out and touched my arm. Her hand was warm.

"Jim, I'm frightened. I've been living under this horror so long . . ."

IT HAPPENED very easily. I was sitting very close to her and her hand was on my arm. I reached out and pulled her against me and for a moment her eyes looked full into mine. Then they closed and I kissed her.

It wasn't like it was with Lila. Her lips were fresh and clean—every inch of her was. It did something inside of me that I had never felt before.

And then I heard it.

Just a small sound. The sound of a shoe against wood. A sound outside Toni's door.

We parted and sat still, looking at each other. Then I got to my feet and crossed swiftly to the door. Toni was beside me as I opened it.

There was no one in the hall. But then we both heard another sound. The sound of a door latch catching as it closed. It was too small a sound to let me know where it had come from. Jason Parker's? Brengle's? James, the butler's?

"Jim!" Toni whispered beside me. "Do you think somebody heard—"

I silenced her mouth with my hand and shook my head. "Don't worry about it. Go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

I pushed her gently into her room and shut her door behind me. Then I walked slowly to my own.

Inside, I sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette. My hand was trembling as I held it, and inside my head I could

hear somebody laughing at me. I was fumbling around in the dark with people who wouldn't stop at murder . . . Murder. That's what the voice was laughing about. And then I remembered. It was in the County Jail building in Chicago. Lila was in my arms and telling me that Frank didn't do it. Frank didn't do it.

The laughter was there until I fell asleep years later . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE afternoon papers were full of me. I was in them up to my neck. One artist had gone so far as to draw a rope around it. There were glowing accounts of the dragnet the police had out for me and predictions that I would be caught before twenty-four hours had passed. Most of the theories were that I had either kept to the fields and woods or that somehow I had managed to get into Wilmington.

I put the papers down on the couch in the library and stared across at Fred Brengle who was watching me with interest.

"You're getting a lot of publicity."

"I can do without it."

He smiled. "The police are as brilliant as usual. Here we sit right under their noses."

I didn't say anything. Talking to Brengle was one thing I could do without. Every word he spoke had mockery in it, as if he were enjoying something. I wondered about last night and that closing door. I hadn't had a chance to talk to Toni alone in the morning, and she had gone to her room shortly after lunch. I hadn't seen her since then. Jason Parker had left the house in the morning and hadn't shown since. I wondered about that too.

"Parker's been gone a long time," I

said.

He shrugged. "He's in town making arrangements for tonight. He'll be back."

There was no point in pressing just what the arrangements were since I was supposed to know anyway. I nodded and said: "Toni doesn't seem to care for our company."

That brought a smile from him. "Oh, she's not here."

I tried to keep from showing surprise, but it rocked me. "She isn't?"

"No. I sent her to town to pick up a guest. One of the early arrivals."

My blood started cooling fast. This wasn't possible. Toni wouldn't have anything to do with the ring . . .

"I thought she was fed up."

Brengle laughed. "Toni has a temper which quiets down after awhile. Besides, this is a special guest."

He stopped talking and lit a cigarette and stared at me over the match flame. I didn't like the hard way his eyes were looking at me.

But that wasn't bothering me too much. What did bother me was that Toni was working for Brengle and her uncle after she had said she was through. After she had listened to me spill my guts. Was it all a trick? Had I walked into another trap? Did Lila have auburn hair too?

I felt ill. What had looked like hope last night was now shattered. I had trusted a woman again . . .

"Toni should be getting back soon." Brengle was looking at his watch.

I looked at mine. It was close to five.

"Care for a drink, Stevens?"

I shook my head no and watched Brengle get up leisurely and pour from a setup beside him.

I felt like getting up and running. I didn't know where, but I felt like it. It was silly and I knew it was silly. Where

could I go? This was my only lead to the real Frank Stevens. So what if Toni had double-crossed me. Could I be any worse off?

Outside the house a car motor approached and brakes grabbed on the gravel driveway. Seconds later two doors slammed.

Brengle turned to me. "That should be Toni."

I got to my feet. I wanted to see her face when she brought the sucker in. I wanted to have a good look at her and let her know just what I thought of her. Maybe she wouldn't care but at least she'd know what I thought.

I heard James opening the front door and voices drifted in. I heard Toni say something and James answer. Then suddenly she was walking into the library. I started to look at her and then my eyes went past her.

I saw Lila walking into the room behind her.

IT WAS one of those moments when time seems to stand still. The world could have exploded and I wouldn't have known it. I knew my mouth was open and I could feel my eyes bulging, but that was all.

She stopped for a moment as her eyes caught my face. Then a radiant smile beamed out at me and she ran across the room.

"Frank, darling!"

She had her arms around my neck and kissed me before I even knew what was happening. Then she stepped back and laughed lightly.

"I called from the airport. I told Fred not to tell you I was here—I wanted to surprise you."

It was more than a surprise. It was the biggest shock I'd ever had. My brain was spinning with it. *She was still calling me Frank! Why?*

I glanced over her shoulder and saw Toni turn and leave the room. I suddenly realized something. Toni had agreed to go to town only because Brengle had told her she was to pick up Lila Stevens! And that was why Brengle had acted so smug . . .

Brengle stepped forward and shook Lila's hand. "It's good to see you again, Mrs. Stevens." Then he turned to me. "I thought it would be a pleasant surprise this way."

There was a smile on his face as he said it, the same kind of smile that was always there. It told me that somehow he was a jump ahead of me, that he knew what was going on and I didn't. Like this.

"It's a surprise, all right," I said, looking back at Lila. "And how did you get out of Chicago without the police checking on you?"

She laughed. "You know me well enough for that, Frank. I just used an assumed name, changed taxicabs three times, and there I was at the airport. It was simple!"

Oh yes, it was very simple. Everything that Lila did was very simple. Like framing me for her husband's murder. And here she was, not three feet away from me and I couldn't do a thing.

Brengle let out a sigh. "Well now that you're here, Lila, things should run smoothly tonight. I think Frank's been worried."

Lila put her hand on my arm. When she used to do that I'd feel goose pimples run up my back. Now I felt as if I wanted to tear that hand off my arm and never touch it again.

"Things have been tough for you, haven't they darling?"

I don't know how she could stand in front of me with that innocent smile, those pearl sweet words dropping from her mouth. As I looked at her I felt

a sudden loathing, as a man might have when he stares at a snake crawling toward him. I knew then that I had never known Lila. That I never would know her. She was the supreme actress, playing a part. She had been playing a part for years. I probably wasn't the first man who had melted at her smile. I probably wouldn't be the last. But there was nothing I could do about that now.

I managed a smile at her which probably surprised her more than anything I could have done. "It's been a little difficult. . . . But you must be tired. I'll tell James to prepare a room for you."

I DIDN'T wait for any answer. I wanted to get out of that room. I needed to talk to someone, but it wasn't Lila or Fred Brengle. I walked swiftly across the room and out into the hall. James was at the head of the stairs, arranging Lila's bags. I walked up to him.

"Where did Miss Parker go, James?"

He looked up at me and nodded at the stairs. "I believe she went to her room, sir."

I nodded back and took the stairs leisurely. They could probably see me from the library, but I didn't care right then. I reached Toni's room and knocked.

"Yes?"

I tried the door and it was open. I closed it behind me. She was standing in front of her dressing table, lighting a cigarette. She was looking at me through the mirror, but she didn't turn around. I walked up to her and touched her arm.

"Toni, why didn't you tell me you were going to pick up Lila."

She still didn't turn around, but she moved a little away from me so my hand fell from her arm.

"I don't see that it matters."

"Toni, what's wrong? Why did you leave us downstairs?"

She turned slowly around. Her eyes looked up at me and there was resentment in them.

"She called you Frank. Maybe she would have been putting on an act in front of the police, but it wouldn't be necessary here."

That rocked me. I grabbed her shoulders and said: "Toni, you don't mean that you think I *am* Frank Stevens! You know—"

"What do you expect me to think? Why should she run into your arms when there isn't any need for subterfuge anymore? That's why I wanted to get her myself. I wanted to see what she would do when she saw you. . . . And what you would do."

"What did you expect me to do—accuse her in front of Brengle?"

She twisted away from me. "You're hurting my arm."

I let her go and felt a tremor in my fingers. "All right Toni," I said, "if that's the way you want it."

She looked at me accusingly. "How else should I want it? She's beautiful, and I can understand how you—"

"Good Lord, Toni, you're not jealous!"

"Jealous?" She turned on me and fire danced in her eyes. She had that same sultry look on her face I had noticed that first time in the *Roadstop*. "You overrate yourself!"

It had been the wrong thing to say. Everything I had said apparently was the same way. I had come up to her because she was the one person who knew the truth and who I felt I could trust. And now . . .

There was a knock at the door.

Toni didn't even look at me as she crossed to it and opened it. Fred Brengle stood in the doorway and he

wasn't smiling at me when he said: "Don't you think you ought to be with your wife, Stevens? She wants to talk to you."

I walked past Toni and through the door. Brengle gave me a sharp glance as I walked by him but didn't say anything. As I went down the stairs I heard the door to Toni's room close. I didn't look back to see if Brengle had gone in.

She was curled up on the sofa when I entered the library. She was curled up like a kitten, looking contented with the world. She had a cigarette in one hand and was slowly sipping a cocktail with the other. I walked up to her.

"O.K. Lila, the game's over."

She put the cocktail down and there was a hard smile in her eyes.

"That's right, Jim, it's all over . . . for you."

I SHOOK my head. "That's where you're wrong Lila, it's not over for me. You nearly fixed it that way, but not quite well enough. I know enough about you and this whole setup to put you behind bars for years."

"Aren't you forgetting something, Jim?"

"What?"

"That you're Frank Stevens. The police believe it, everyone here believes it—and I'm going to make it stick that way."

"Uhunh. I won't work. You can't hang a man that easily."

"You're going to hang yourself, Jim."

I wasn't getting anywhere with her. She was too confident. She knew something and was holding it back. I was sure of it.

"You've got something on your mind," I told her.

She crushed out her cigarette and stared at me. I could see that she was thinking.

"You're right, Jim, I have."

"What is it?"

"My husband would like to make a deal with you."

"What kind of a deal?"

"A deal over the murder rap of Dagano. The evidence is too strong against him and he knows that your identity might be established in court. We had you picked out for a long time. You were the only man I knew who didn't have family ties, a wife, or close friends. You traveled too much for that. But there's always the chance you might prove your identity."

I was getting a lot. Straight from a beautiful shoulder I was getting it. So I had been on the sucker list for a long time, just waiting for a deal like this to come along.

"And what's the deal?"

She got up and faced me. "I'll let Frank tell you about that himself. Are you interested?"

"And where is Frank?"

She shook her head. "That's something you'll find out if you're interested. I can take you to him."

I had never expected this. She was offering to take me to the one man I had to find. I knew I would be taking a chance in doing anything she said, but there was nothing to lose now. The .38 felt good in my pocket.

"O.K. I'll go. When do we start?"

"Right now. We can take Brengle's car."

She started for the door and I followed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE twilight was starting to fall over the countryside as Lila tooled Brengle's sedan on to the gravel road and headed west, away from Wilmington.

I sat tensely beside her on the front

seat. I could feel my nerves bunching up. This was the showdown. I knew it.

"Where are we going?"

She didn't speed the car, just kept it at around forty. "Just a few miles up the road. There's a farmhouse. Frank's been there for some time."

I didn't say anything else. There wasn't anything to say now. We had a truce that would end the minute we met Frank Stevens. After that I'd have plenty to say.

I saw Lila look into the rear mirror and frown. Then her foot hit the accelerator. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw a car pulling up behind us fast. It was a long red Lincoln Continental convertible. Streaks of dust from our car half hid it, but not enough to keep me from knowing that it was the kind of car Toni Parker drove.

I didn't have time to say anything. The Pontiac was crowding sixty already, but it wasn't enough. That Lincoln must have been hitting eighty-five all along.

Suddenly it was along side us and I could see Toni behind the wheel. I only got a quick glance at her face but it was enough. There was fear there, but the sort of fear that makes a frightened man brave.

"The little fool!" Lila cried out as Toni's car pulled ahead and started to cut in front of us.

I hollered something at Lila but it wasn't necessary. She hit the brake pedal and swerved the car to the right. I could see a ditch coming up at us, and braced myself. Then suddenly the car stopped.

After I got my breath back I looked out the windshield. Toni's car had stopped a hundred feet ahead of us and she was running back toward us. Then I looked at Lila. Her hands were shak-

ing on the wheel and I didn't have to look at her eyes to know that rage was burning in them.

I opened my door and jumped out of the car as Toni came running up. She fell gasping into my arms.

"Jim! It's a trap! Don't go with her—you're both going to be killed!"

I pushed her away from me. "Toni! What are you talking about!"

She sobbed the words out. "It's Brengle, Jim! I heard him telephoning Rigoni! He said the trap was all set—that you and Lila were driving out—and to be sure both of you were killed!"

My brain stopped working. I turned toward Lila. She was sitting behind the wheel, her hands on her purse, her face pale.

"You're lying!" Lila screamed. "He didn't say I was to be killed—"

Her voice broke off. Then a harsh brittle laughter bubbled on her lips. Her hands opened the purse and came up with a snub-nosed .32 automatic. When she spoke her voice was a choking hysteria.

"The dirty double-crossing bastard! So he was in love with *you*! Well he won't get away with it! I've done his dirty work for years and never complained! I even killed Dagano for him! And now he thinks he can get me out of the way like this!

"Don't look so shocked Jim Marks! Yes—it was a trap! And Rigoni will take care of you—look up the road—see that car coming! But I won't be here—I've got a score to settle myself! As for you, Toni Parker—I'll see you die right now!"

I saw the automatic raise. There wasn't time to try and take it from her. The only thing I could do was shove Toni violently.

"Lookout, Toni!" I heard my voice as a blast of sound filled my ears. Then I felt a hot fire sear my right side and

I fell over Toni beside the ditch.

Vaguely I heard a car motor roar behind me. Through a haze I saw Lila sweep the car around and head back toward the Parker estate. Then I was trying to get to my knees as Toni cried out.

"She shot you!"

I felt her pull herself from beneath me and get to her feet. There was a dull roaring in my head as I heard her cry: "That other car, Jim! It's Rigoni!"

I TRIED to talk but couldn't find my voice. My throat felt swollen and pain was biting at my tongue. Then suddenly I knew that Toni wasn't with me. I looked up. She had ran back to her car and was starting the engine. Up the road, not a quarter of a mile away I could see a sedan tearing toward us. From one of the side windows a man was leaning out. He was holding a sub-machine gun and I knew it was all over.

I got to my feet and started to limp toward Toni's car. I had to get her away somehow . . . crazy thoughts . . . where . . . machine gun . . . Toni . . .

The continental's gears clashed as the sedan sped up. Then suddenly Toni spun the car across the road right into the path of the sedan.

"Toni! For God's sake—Toni!"

It was too late to stop it but I screamed anyway. I heard a screech of brakes. Beyond the Lincoln I saw a swirl of dust as the sedan veered to the right. Then the driver lost control of the car. It spun sideways and hit the back end of the Lincoln.

There was a crash of metal on metal. The Lincoln slid around and half into the ditch. But the other car didn't stop. It hit the opposite side of the road and vaulted the ditch. As it hit the ground it turned over and smashed

up against a tree. There was one loud sound as wood met metal, and then silence.

It took me years to reach the Lincoln, but I did it. I saw her slumped behind the wheel, her head on the horn ring. I pushed the door button and then reached in for her.

"Toni! Toni!"

She didn't seem to hear me. There was a large bruise over her right eye where her head had hit the steering wheel, and a trickle of blood was running down her face. I took her face in my hands and kissed it. I cried on it. She couldn't be dead. . . . She—

There was a sound across the road. I turned my head and saw a man crawling from the wreckage of the sedan. I could see two other men thrown up against mangled doors, but they weren't moving. But this one was. He was on his knees, holding a sub-machine gun in his hands. And then I heard him scream at me. He swore a dirty streak of words that didn't stop. And all the while the sub-machine gun was raising in his shaking hands.

I left Toni go and my hand went into my coat pocket. As I pulled the .38 out a sharp staccato of sound split the air. Dirt ploughed up a few feet away from me.

I didn't think. I raised the gun and pointed it. My hand was shaking but his was shaking worse. I felt the gun buck three times and then he slumped. Then I aimed again and sent three more shots into his body. I wanted him dead. I wanted him deader than any man who ever died. Then I turned back to Toni.

She was stirring on the car seat. I forgot the pain in my side, the roaring in my head. I dropped the gun back into my pocket and took her into my arms.

"Toni—Toni—darling why did you

do it?"

She opened her eyes and stared blankly at me for a moment. Then her arms went around my neck and she sobbed.

"It—was the only thing I could think of—they would have killed you—"

I didn't say anything else. I couldn't. Her lips were fastened to mine.

But then I came to. For a thought struck me that set me trembling. I pushed Toni gently away and got in behind the wheel of the Lincoln.

"Jim! You're hurt—you can't drive! Where are we going?"

I started the motor. I put the car in gear. There was a grinding sound at the rear wheel where the fender was curled around the tire. But the car moved. It moved with a bumping screeching grind, but it moved.

"I'm going after a man, Toni. I'm going after Frank Stevens."

I TURNED the Lincoln into the driveway and rammed on the brakes in front of the house. A short distance away I saw the Pontiac sedan that Lila had been driving. Beside me, Toni grabbed my arm.

"Jim! You can't go in there! You'll be killed! You—"

Her voice trailed off as a sound wailed from the highway a short distance to the east of the house. It was a siren. I knew what that meant.

"I'm going in," I told her and got from behind the wheel.

I didn't know I could still move. My right side was numb and my arm felt like a leaden weight. I knew that I was bleeding because I could feel the hot sticky warmth.

I started for the door of the house.

Two sharp shots echoed from inside.

I made the steps and heard Toni slam the car door behind her.

Then I had the door of the house

open. There was no one in sight but I heard a groan from the library, and then a loud shrieking laugh.

It was Lila.

I walked into the library and saw her standing over a man's body on the floor. She was holding the .32 in her hand and laughing hysterically.

The man on the floor was Fred Brengle.

Outside the house I heard the siren wail and then brakes screech to a stop. I heard footsteps running toward the house and heard Toni call from the doorway.

"Jim! The police are here! Jim—stay out of there!"

It was too late to stay out. Lila turned quickly and saw me standing just inside the entrance. Her features were tightened into a savage look that only hatred can produce.

"So you got away! Well you're just in time, Jim Marks! You wanted to find Frank Stevens, didn't you? Well take a good look. There never was a real Frank Stevens! It was only a name that Fred and I used as an alias! Does that surprise you? You poor fool! Take a good look at the man who tried to doublecross me! Take a good look because it's going to be your last!"

Her voice ended on a screaming note and the gun came up in her hand.

I tried to lift my right hand to my coat pocket for the gun, but I knew I would never make it in time. Behind me I heard Toni scream. And then I heard a chorus of shots from somewhere behind me.

Lila's gun never got a chance to fire. She swayed on her feet, a shocked look on her face, and then a bubble of sound came from her lips as she fell to the floor. She didn't move.

Somebody grabbed me. I half turned and Toni was in my arms sobbing. And

behind her came a swarm of men, some in uniform. They all had guns out and I knew where the shots had come from that had killed Lila.

And then I recognized one of the men. It was Chris Paddock. Paddock, the guy who had been taking me to the gallows. That seemed like a long time ago.

I nodded at Paddock and pointed to the body of Brengle.

"Stevens . . . He's the real—"

He nodded. "We know. We heard what she said. But we didn't need that. Old man Parker spilled everything just before he died."

Toni stiffened in my arms and turned.

"Uncle Jason! What happened!"

Paddock shrugged as a man in uniform came up. He was wearing Captain's bars.

"Sorry to have to tell you this, Miss Parker, but your Uncle committed suicide. He died a half hour ago. But before he died he told us everything."

Toni lowered her head but didn't cry anymore. I cleared my throat. "And where does that put me now?"

He grinned. "I guess you've been put to a lot of trouble, Marks. After you tell us what you know about this, we'll see."

I could have laughed in his face at that one. A lot of trouble. Somebody was laughing in heaven over that. A lot of trouble. Tell my story? Sure, I'd tell my story.

"I—"

The room was very hazy. Everybody was spinning. A hell of a time to play tricks. . . . The room was gone. . . . Just blackness. . . .

THE road was bright and sunny. The whole world was bright and sunny. I sat beside Toni in the Pontiac and sighed.

"Feel better, Jim?"

I managed a smile, straightening. I could feel the bandages covering my side tighten. Even they felt good.

"Much better. You know, you look good with a shiner."

She ignored me with a short laugh. Then her face clouded.

"Jim, I still don't understand why Brengle and Lila wanted to kill you when the police were looking—"

"It's very simple, Toni," I said. "As long as I was alive there was a possibility the police could prove I wasn't Stevens—even though there actually wasn't a real Frank Stevens. Brengle was the brains of the ring, and Lila framed me for the rap her husband would have had to take if he had been caught—even though she was the real killer. When I showed up at your place they had to kill me. If the police got me it would have blown wide open.

"But your uncle was fed up too. When he went to town it wasn't to make any arrangements. He—"

I could see that this was hurting her so I stopped. "Anyway, it's all over, and I'm still Jim Marks. Like the name?"

"I like the man."

"You better if you're going to marry him."

Ahead a large sign stood out on the highway. I stared at it and spelled the letters slowly inside my head. R-O-A-D-S-T-O-P.

Toni must have seen it too. She turned her head toward me and smiled, wrinkling her shiner.

"Remember? . . ."

I remembered. It seemed like an eternity ago, but I remembered.

"I met a girl there," I said.

"Maybe she's still there."

"We could see."

We pulled up under the sign and laughed together.



The Man in the Museum

by Dwight V. Swain

THE Murderer never knew quite when it was he made that final, awful, inevitable decision to kill.

It began, of course, at Lorimer's office. Lorimer, the furred law-cat. The fat little man with the bald head and brusque manner and high-pitched voice. The belligerent midget with the watchful eyes, staring through the haze of smoke from those eternal, endless, stinking black cigars.

The Murderer knew that Lorimer

was enjoying his discomfiture. It stood out in every line and gesture. For that matter, what other conceivable reason was there for letting him know? The bar association would have frowned at the very idea. It was opposed to every rule and tenet of legal ethics.

But Lorimer told him anyhow, leaning back with fingers laced across his paunch like meshed pink wieners, heavy-lidded, all but smirking.

It hit the Murderer hard. After all,



The body of the man, limp in death, face bearing the mark of agony, toppled slowly from the fatal embrace of the Iron Maiden

The killer loose in the museum had no difficulty in finding murder weapons. They were standing in every corner and hanging, ready for action, on every wall

it was so completely unexpected, so entirely at odds with everything that had gone before. At first he could hardly believe it.

Involuntarily, he stiffened in his chair, opened his mouth to snarl denials.

Then he caught the veiled mirth in the little man's eyes, knew that Lorimer was expecting—nay, anticipating—curses, rage, vituperation.

With a violent effort, he fought his fury down, rose in careful, cultivated calm.

"That's all, then, Mr. Lorimer?" he murmured.

Disappointment flashed across the other's face.

"That's all!" Brusquely, Lorimer turned away, shuffled the papers on his desk.

The Murderer pivoted, paced calmly out into the anteroom, there to bow mockingly straight into the dowdy secretary's prim, thin-lipped stare. He noted with satisfaction that she flushed.

Chuckling to himself, he left the building.

The pretense of jauntiness rode with him all the way down to The Jacob's Ladder, the tiny, expensive sea-food place where he'd planned on having dinner. As always, the service was excellent, the cuisine superb.

But now his thoughts were too much for him. Bubbling, seething, a hell's brew of hate and futility and fury. The food was as clay in his mouth, the wine all vinegar and gall. Half way through, he gave it up, stumbled from the table in a red haze of rage.

Outside again, he glanced at his watch: quarter of six.

He decided to walk to the museum. The board meeting wasn't till eight, so he had plenty of time. Perhaps the fresh air would clear his head.

He walked. Endlessly, he walked. Mile upon mile, blank and unheeding.

He did not even sense the storm till the first sharp drops of driven rain spat-tered against his fury-fevered face. Then, stopping, he stared up at the moiling black thunderheads that tossed and swirled against the sky.

Like a signal, lightning slashed out of the murk in jagged splendor, echoed by its kettle-drumming thunder. The rain came in a rush—tumultuous, drenching.

It cut through his confusion, washed away the doubts and fearings. Everything was clear now, all too clear. He must . . . act . . . or return again to the life from whence he came.

Instinctively, he knew there was no choice. Not for him. Let others shrink from the inevitable, turn away to poverty and disgrace like cravens. Not he! He was of the blood of the Renaldis! There were those who claimed that name shone brighter even than the Borgias. Good! He would live up to it. He would bring it new dark fame.

He would kill!

BY A miracle, the cab was there for the flagging. In minutes he was back at the museum, stalking through the towering vastness of marble corridors where his footsteps echoed like the *crack* of a breech block slamming shut.

Now that his mind was made up, he felt better. Now he could act, move forward, take whatever steps he must.

It was not simple. Murder was always a difficult thing. The police inevitably would ask their questions, and he, for one, did not look forward to the prospect. After all, who but he would have a motive? Lorimer would talk, and then . . .

It made him pause, almost reconsider.

Then came the answer. Absurdly simple, of course: kill Lorimer, too. His secretary, if need be. Make a clean

sweep of it—

But motive. It still stopped him short. The police were not fools. Even if they couldn't prove, they would suspect, and he was not sure how much punishment he could take without cracking. He'd heard too much about their methods.

Three corpses. Perhaps more . . .

He went tense.

Three corpses. And more! More, and more, and more! That was the answer! That was the solution! Kill, and keep on killing! Murder right and left, at every opportunity. Strike down the innocent along with the guilty. Make it a mad slaughter-fest, without apparent rhyme or reason.

Mad?

It would look like the work of a madman! No normal person could have a motive for such a mass extermination. The police would realize it. They would call in psychiatrists, search for a lunatic. They might even find one—what museum didn't have a few members of its board and staff who were hanging on the ragged edge? Those would be the ones the police would gall and torment! Whereas he, who was obviously and completely sane, would be overlooked in the melee. There could be no tracing of his crimes, no clue to show his logic.

A tingle of anticipation touched his spine. Now that he had it planned, he could hardly wait. Get the job done, once and for all! Let loose all those wild ideas he'd treasured through the years as he read the Renaldi's bloody tale! They would strike terror now, those ideas. He'd translate them into dripping gore and horror.

Yes, it was the work of genius—pure, without flaw. He would kill, and he would live to gloat over it. His victims would go unrevengeed to their barren graves. The thought was worthy

of old Nicolo Renaldi himself, murderous mediaeval monster that he was. He had killed in a society that looked lightly on such matters, from the exalted and protected position of *doge*. His descendant would slaughter in a different setting, amid perils the *doge* had never dreamed of.

The Murderer sucked air deep into his lungs. Exaltation surged through him. This was his moment! Old Nicolo would have doffed his casque in tribute!

THE feeling still was with him when he turned on the lights in the arms and armor section.

Slowly, he paced around the room, surveyed the gleaming order of the cases.

It was important, this part. If these were to be a madman's murders, let the crimes reflect the disordered brain behind them. The shock effect would be the greater.

The mace came first. A fifteenth-century morning star, with its great, spike-bristling ball of iron. In its day, it had smashed armor, crushed in skulls like paper.

The Murderer chuckled, laid it carefully aside. Yes, by all means take the morning star!

A gleam of light from the oriental weapons case caught his eye like a sinister beacon. He paused, stared down at the shining thing.

Familiar as he was with arms, he did not recognize it at first. Stooping, he scrutinized the card: "*Bag'hmak* Tiger Claws." Three steel prongs set in a metal grip. Edges like razors.

One blow at a man's throat with those, to snuff out life forever!

He laid them beside the mace.

Slowly, the pile grew. A harpoon gun, designed to fire barbed death at fish and seals. A Congo headsman's

axe. Strangling cord of a Hindu Thug. Tomahawk, scalping knife, shillelah, rapier.

He was finished, finally. Or almost finished. There still were precautions to be taken.

Carefully, he selected a coat of chain mail to fit him. Dragged out a Chinese mandarin's robe to shroud him to the ankles. Looked around for something to serve him as a mask.

His eyes lighted on a familiar suit of Italian armor on its rack. Old Nicolo's armor, gleaming as brightly as it had the day he bought it from Vincenzo Zenon, its maker, in 1446. And old Nicolo had driven a sharp bargain, too. He'd treated Vincenzo to a goblet of wine . . . but the wine had been poisoned, and the money for the armor had never left Renaldi's house.

The idea that came to the Murderer then was so in keeping with his plan that he laughed aloud.

He crossed to the armor, tried on the great casque helmet with its pierced visor and close-fitting neckpiece. It fitted as if tailored, a perfect mask.

"So you'll be with me in spirit tonight, Nicolo?" he chuckled, adding the casque to the pile. And then, remembering: "But if we take your helmet, your dagger must go, too!"

A beautiful thing, the *doge's* dagger. Gleaming with silver, inlaid with gold, it held center position in a display of Renaissance weapons. The Murderer removed it from its case, caressed it as tenderly as a woman smoothing her lover's hair. Again he admired its jeweled hilt. The intricacy of pattern. The skilled workmanship.

And something more, too—something that came straight from the evil genius of old Nicolo Renaldi.

He had designed this thing of beauty and of death, had old Nicolo. His had been the brain that ordered the blade's

deep etchings, fanciful patterns to delight the eye—and carry a cargo of poison so deadly that the merest scratch meant death.

He had planned the other, too, the mechanism. It was simple, really. Merely a setting of the blade on a spring in such a manner that it sank back within the hilt half an inch when a blow was struck. And in sinking, it projected two tiny, fang-like needles half an inch from their lair in the heavy ornamental guard, deep into the hand of him who held the dagger. Because the needles were poisoned, just as was the blade, the holder would die, then, shortly, in an agony that was terrible to see. Or perhaps whether it was terrible or not was only a matter of viewpoint. Because old Nicolo, who planned it, had not considered it terrible. To him, it had been amusing. He had laughed so often when the fools he sent forth to murder his enemies with this dagger writhed dying, realizing at long last, with final, fading consciousness, that the *doge's* dagger killed both murderer and murdered.

THE murderer sighed a trifle wistfully as he studied it. He felt like an ant looking at the stars. His own dreams seemed pale and pygmy. Here was perfection in this art of murder, epitomized, frozen in precious stones and steel. Cautiously, he ran his thumb along the razor edge. Pressed the point against a case, while gripping the jeweled pommel only, so that he could see the deadly needles slide in and out without danger.

"Yes, Nicolo!" he murmured. "Your dagger must go, too!"

"What is it, sir?" a quavering voice broke in upon him.

The murderer started as if old Nicolo himself were at his elbow. Instinctively, his hands knotted into fists. It was

all he could do to keep from crying out aloud.

But he had control. It was what he was depending on. He used it now.

Ever so slowly, ever so casually, he turned.

Holm, the ancient, creaking attendant in the arms and armor section, stood behind him, smiling wanly.

"I was late getting out, sir," Holm said. "The section is home to me, really, now that my wife's gone. So when I saw the light. . ."

"Of course," The Murderer said. He chuckled, deep in his throat, mentally complimenting himself the while on his own poise. "You've been here a long time, Holm. I can imagine how you must feel." And then, since some explanation seemed called for: "There's a board meeting tonight, Holm. I've been getting together a bit of a special display of interesting pieces for the members."

Old Holm nodded.

"Yes, sir. May I be of any help, sir?"

The idea came, then, like a dagger driven deep into The Murderer's vitals. It raced that fast, struck that hard. Suddenly his breath was shallow, the clothes about his chest too tight. He dared not meet Holm's faded eyes. A wave of horror overwhelmed him.

And yet, why not? Sooner or later it had to begin, and one corpse was as good as another. Holm would be better than most, in fact. He was so old, so harmless, so helpless. What conceivable motive could anyone have for slaughtering him? He would make perfect cover.

Again, it was decision.

The Murderer braced himself against the case to still his body's trembling. In spite of his control, his voice rang taut and strained.

"Why, yes, Holm," he heard himself

saying. "If you really want to help, that is. I'll check the list while you get out the pieces." A pause, while his blood ran cold, and his teeth grated against each other, and his head seemed to spin and whirl and dance. "Begin . . . with that pepperbox pistol in the bottom case."

He could almost hear bones creaking as the old man bent. His own eyes were on the mace, the great, spike-studded morning-star mace, crusher of armor, smasher of skulls. He grasped it in one spasmodic movement, heaved it overhead.

"This one, sir?"

With all his might, The Murderer swung the mace.

CHAPTER II

Death in the Dungeon

THE new knives—new only in terms of their acquisition; they were probably two hundred years old—were the work of some forgotten Mexican master. They had a delicacy of balance Tom McCray had seldom seen before. Finally, despite the fact that it was almost closing time in the museum, he could postpone trying them no longer. Gesturing to Holm, arms and armor's aged attendant, to indicate his destination, Tom hurried down the stairs to the room he had nicknamed The Dungeon.

It was appropriate, really. There was little space, and bars guarded the lone, high-set window. Upon returning from service to his post as arms and armor's curator, Tom had gathered together the museum's scattered torture implements and installed them here, where visitors could shiver under their full impact. A rack stood under the window, a display of cats-o'-nine-tails above it. A wheel occupied another wall. The boot was

there, too, and thumbscrews, and a rubber truncheon from Dachau—a hundred vicious mementos of man's inhumanity to man. Tom's special pride was an Iron Maiden towering in one corner. Its door was lashed securely open, displaying the rusting inner spikes. With grim humor, he had had the section's telephone installed inside, so that anyone using it had to enter the Maiden's still-sinister body.

But The Dungeon had other uses, also. At the moment, it was scheduled to become a target range. Tom dragged a heavy strip of beaverboard from its hiding place under the rack, propped it before the Maiden, and began a bombardment with the Mexican knives.

He had been at it nearly fifteen minutes when he heard the whistle from the stairway.

Knives still in hand, he walked over to the landing.

"Greetings, Angel!" He tried to make the words properly casual, as always, and as always, he failed. He couldn't honestly say he'd expected not to. After all, how could anyone be casual about Clare Kennedy?

She was at the head of the stairs now, leaning over the rail, laughing down at him. Auburn hair framed the perfect oval of her face. The red lips were parted in a merry mockery that the grey eyes' tenderness belied. Gaily, she waved.

"Honestly, Tom, you're getting as bad as Holm. Must I drag you out of your chamber of horrors bodily?"

Tom grinned ruefully.

"Could be." And then: "Come on down, Angel. Van, with the field unit, just sent me some Mexican throwing knives. They're wonderful."

"My dear sir!" Again, she mocked him. "If you think I intend to spend my life playing second fiddle to a collection of scrap iron—" She broke off.

"I'd like to, Tom, honestly. But tonight's the board meeting, and I've got to be back early to make sure everything's all ready." She arched her neck, wrinkled her pertly pretty nose. "That's what I get for letting my best beau talk me into becoming office manager of this mausoleum! Once a month I have to spend a perfectly good evening playing nursemaid to that stupid board."

Tom grinned.

"But think of all the dinner dates you get out of it, too!" One after another, he hurled the knives into the beaverboard. Then, turning, he raced up the stairs, three at a time. "Come on, Angel! We've got eating to do!" He swept a willing Clare into his arms. Thrilled to her eager young body's vibrant warmth against him. Sampled the red lips till she pushed away, hair disheveled, gasping for breath.

"My dear sir!" She bubbled mock indignation. "I know you want to eat, but why make me the entree?"

BECAUSE of the storm clouds already hovering overhead, the eating turned out to be a trifle on the skimpy side, at a one-arm beanery three blocks from the museum grounds.

Tom made a wry face as he pushed aside his plate.

"Sorry, Angel. This is pretty tasteless pickings."

Clare matched his grimace with one of her own.

"No more so than tonight's meeting will be."

"That bad?"

"Frankly, they might just as well not waste the time." Clare wrinkled her nose in disgust. "We begin with Mr. Johnson saying a few words on our acquisition of the mummy and mummy case of the Princess Menne. When he's through, Mr. Updike will wake us all

up again and review the appropriations for next year. Mrs. Updike will grumble about them, but agree to make the necessary donations. That will go against Mr. Lorimer's grain, of course. He'll have to warn her against letting her generosity run away with her. Then Mr. Young will get angry and demand to know whether Mr. Lorimer's there as Mrs. Updike's attorney, or as a member of the board. By that time, even Mr. Dorstmann may be awake. If he is, he'll get angry, too, and mumble in Low German about these johnny-come-latelies who want to run everything. Then Dr. Wang, our professional peace-maker, will quote Confucious and Lao-tzu. Mr. Quinn will be having a wonderful time spurring everybody on, of course, because he's at least got a sense of humor. He'll end up by telling everybody that he wishes he were off the board, so that he could amuse his readers with some really factual accounts of how museums are operated. That will break up the meeting entirely, with everybody mad at everybody else, and Mr. Updike slipping Tonia Roberts five dollars to replace the nylons he's put runs in under the table." She sighed, arched her neck wearily. "No, Mr. McCray, this will not be a spectacular meeting."

Tom grinned, rubbed his right cheek with the fingers of his left hand.

"Oh, I don't know, Angel. If Tonia Roberts really likes to play these games you attribute to her—"

"Tom McCray! Stop it!" Clare's grey eyes sparked dangerously. "If you say a word about that—that creature —"

"Why, Angel! What's wrong?" Maliciously, Tom pasted on his most sickening combination of solicitude and injured innocence. "I thought you and Miss Roberts were the best of friends."

"That—that creature!" Clare re-

peated furiously. "Honestly, Tom, it's disgusting. It's bad enough to have a wolf like Paul Updike as director of the museum, but when he chooses Tonia Roberts as his secretary—well, it's almost more than I can stand. I wouldn't pay any attention if it was just after hours; that's their business. But it's all the time. I'm surprised Mrs. Updike stands for it. She and her money got him his job. You'd think he'd at least be decent enough not to flaunt Tonia before her."

TOM chuckled, baited her on. "Oh, I don't know, Angel. That Tonia is pretty fancy flaunting, from where I sit."

"From where anyone sits," Clare retorted acidly. "I've never seen her skirt below her knees, and the way the necks of her dresses are cut would keep her out of any decent nightclub."

Tom shrugged.

"Dunno, Clare. When anyone's got the equipment she has, I can't say I blame 'em for letting people enjoy it."

Clare drew in one sharp, furious breath.

"Other girls have . . . equipment . . . too, but they don't find it necessary to focus spotlights on it!" Her nostrils flared. Her hands were small, white-knuckled fists. "Tom McCray, there are times when you make me *so* mad —!" She jumped in a flurry of crisp skirts and fluffy auburn hair, clicked off toward the restaurant's door.

She might even have gone on alone, Tom reflected, if the storm hadn't broken just then.

THEY got back, finally, in a somewhat bedraggled fashion. Outside, the thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed, and rain lashed down in drenching sheets.

"Lights in the board room are on,

Angel," Tom pointed out as they came in the door.

Clare nodded, gave his fingers a little squeeze.

"Probably it's Mr. Johnson, fussing with the mummy." She hesitated. "Would you mind coming up to the office with me, dear? I want to pick up my notebooks. Tonia and I will have to take the minutes."

"Sure thing." Still talking, they climbed the stairs.

The office was dark. They stepped inside. Tom snapped on the light.

It revealed Paul Updike, the director, wrapped in Tonia Roberts' embarrassingly close embrace.

Clare went bright pink to the roots of her hair. Lips thin, she hurried to her desk without speaking.

"Pardon us," Tom said. He noted with interest that Updike at least had the grace to flush.

Not Tonia Roberts. She straightened with complete nonchalance, smoothed her dress. Quite a dress, too, Tom observed. It matched the green of her eyes and fitted every curve of her lush body as sleekly as her skin.

"Who cares?" She shrugged, lighted a cigarette, set about rearranging her smooth black coiffure. "I imagine you've seen such before."

Tom grinned in spite of himself.

"Could be." And then: "Clare wanted her notebook."

Tonia laughed.

"Take mine. I doubt that I'll get around to using it." She tossed it to Tom.

He grinned again, flicked through it.

"Regarding your offer of one complete set, Filipino armor, made of brass rings and water buffalo horns—"

Updike laughed, but Tom caught the uneasiness, the strain, in his voice.

"You mean you can read that chicken-scratching, McCray? Where on

earth did you learn?"

It was the old process of making conversation, pure and simple, and Tom recognized it as such. Still, he couldn't really blame the director for wanting to ease the tension. And tense was the word for Paul Updike right now. His debonair air had a ragged edge, his hairline mustache was ruffled, and his long, supple, beautifully-manicured fingers trembled when he drew out his gold-ribbed lighter.

"I picked it up in the Marines," Tom said. "Once I spent nine months on an island where even the gooney-birds didn't stop. We had to have something to do to keep from going crazy, so one of the fellows who'd been a commercial teacher organized a class."

"Indeed?" Updike murmured. "What a way to spend nine months!" He smiled absently around at all of them. "Shall we go down to the board room now?"

Tonia Roberts shrugged, ground out her cigarette.

"I suppose so. If you gotta go, you gotta go." She stretched like a sleek green cat, displaying every line and curve of her superb body to perfection. "Though it depends on what you're looking for, at that."

Clare cut in before Tom could comment.

"It does indeed," she rapped tartly. "Shall we go now?"

MR. JOHNSON, the Egyptologist, and his mummy-case already were in the board room. So was Mr. Dorstmann, whose sole claim to fame was that he had run a chain of bakeries up to a million dollars and now was engaged in running them down again by becoming a patron of the arts. He nodded shortly to the newcomers, muttered some guttural incoherency, and returned to his conversation with Dr.

Wang, the bland, smooth-faced Chinese who acted as curator of the museum's oriental exhibits.

"Well, we're off to a good start," Tom told Clare. "The mood people are in tonight, we're building up to a nice, juicy murder."

"A murder?" a new voice cut in. "That's for me, Mac. Deal me in."

There was no mistaking that voice.

"Hello, Ed," Tom said. "How's the newspaper racket?"

"After a fashion, m'lad, after a fashion." Ed Quinn grinned. He did it readily and without reserve. As Clare had said, he had a sense of humor. "Got anything worth two sticks of type in that chamber of horrors you call the arms and armor section?"

"Not much," Tom confessed. An idea struck him. "Unless maybe you like Mexican throwing knives. I got some of those in today."

The publisher nodded.

"Sounds all right. I might do with that." And then, glancing around: "Oh-oh! More lambs for the slaughter! See you later, Mac." He hurried away, a queer, bandy-legged little figure — jovial, quick-moving, eyes sharp behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

The new lambs turned out to be Mr. Young, whose war-time industrial achievements had won him both a fortune and a place on the museum's board, and Mrs. Updike. They made a queer, contrasting pair—the man over six feet three, powerful, with heavy shoulders and the long arms of a boxer. His hair was crisp and black and wavy, his face aquiline, his manner one of push and drive.

Mrs. Updike, on the other hand, looked a good ten years older than her husband, the museum director. Her hair was fast greying, her face harsh with the years. There was a stiff-necked stubbornness about her, a rocky

set to her jaw. Tonight she looked even more irritable than usual.

Then, even before Tom had a chance to comment, Mr. Lorimer—attorney to both the museum and Mrs. Updike—crowded into the room, a dowdy, mousy-looking woman of about thirty at his heels.

"His secretary, Miss North," Clare murmured. "I think he must keep her to assure Mrs. Updike of at least one flattering comparison."

AT THAT moment, Paul Updike rapped for order.

"Please, my friends—" His smile was at its zenith, his air one of cool control, his appearance distinguished. "If you'll all be seated, we can speed this meeting on its way. We'll begin tonight with a report on an important new acquisition. May I present Mr. Johnson, our Egyptologist?"

"Here it comes!" Clare whispered. She leaned against Tom's arm. The nearness of her made his every nerve tingle. He caught the faint fragrance of lilacs. Glimpsed the coppery highlights of her hair.

"I reckon this here is a mighty big day for our museum," Mr. Johnson drawled. He was a tall, lanky, aging man whom no one had ever mistaken as being from anyplace but Texas. His face was pleasant, kindly, his manner slow and easy. He puffed on his pipe as he talked, one hand thrust deep into the pocket of his unpressed tweeds.

Across the table from him, Mrs. Updike pursed her lips. Her nostrils flared noticeably. Then, without further warning, she slapped her left hand down on the table, leaned back with her head at its most arrogant angle.

"Tell me, Mr. Johnson, must we endure that stench from your foul pipe during the entire evening?" Her voice had a ring of deliberate insult.

Mr. Johnson's seamed face drew up into a gentle smile. Slowly, he took the pipe from his mouth, laid it down on the table before him.

"Don't reckon you do, Mrs. Updike," he chuckled. "An' my doctor'll thank you for it, too. He always goes around claiming I'll knock my bum ticker to pieces with too much tobacco." And then: "Now, if you-all don't mind, we'll get on with the Princess Menne. I got her right here." He turned to a hospital cart behind him on which lay a colorfully decorated mummy case. "The princess is right inside here, folks, if you'll just crowd around—"

He raised the lid.

But it was not the Princess Menne who lay within, shrouded in her wrappings of those thousands of years ago, preserved through an eternity by the skill of her embalmers.

No, this corpse was of more recent vintage.

The body in the mummy case was that of old Abram Holm, and his head had been crushed by a blow as hard as it had been vicious.

FOR an instant silence reigned—the taut, paralyzed silence that comes with sudden shock.

Then Mrs. Updike opened her mouth and screamed.

It was a horrid sound, a sound to echo in the spine and make the blood run cold. Again it came, and again, shrilling through the room like a banshee's wail.

The room exploded into tumult. A babble of voices, a rumble of panic, a rocketing fear. . .

Tom McCray stiffened at the sight of Holm's corpse. A giant hand seized the soft flesh of his belly, twisted at it with icy fingers. He cursed beneath his breath.

Who in God's name would kill old

Holm? It was incredible, unbelievable. The old man was the soul of kindness, a friend to everyone. He'd worked in the museum for years. Knew the arms and armor section better than Tom himself.

But now he lay here, dead.

Without thinking, Tom stared about him through the tumult. A jangling note of alarm blared in his brain. At first he could not place it. Then he knew.

Ed Quinn was gone!

It didn't take much study to know what had happened. Quinn had risen to the rank of publisher, but his heart was still that of a cub reporter. The chance for a scoop like this was a temptation stronger than he could bear. He'd run out to call the paper, get photographers, maybe even rush an extra to the stands.

Only if he succeeded, it would be the end of the museum. Tom could imagine the way the other papers would react. Let alone the police—Tom winced at the very thought of what they'd say. It wouldn't do any good to make excuses, then. The problem was to stop it, now.

On the double, Tom ducked out the door.

There were half a dozen phones in the building. He raced from one to the other, fighting against time. But nowhere did he find Ed Quinn.

For an instant, he wondered if perhaps the bandy-legged little publisher had made his call, then slipped back into the board room with the others. Or if he might have left the museum entirely, gone in person to carry the news.

But no. It didn't make sense. Ed Quinn would never leave the scene of a crime. He hadn't had time to make his call. Unless—

With a start, Tom realized the truth.

Now that he thought about it, it was so obvious as to be painful.

There was one other phone. An extension, true, but still a phone. The phone in his own section, down in The Dungeon, inside the Iron Maiden. Quinn knew of that phone. He'd seen it a dozen times. Commented on it ribaldly in print.

Tom ran for the narrow room. It was clear at the other end of the building. He was panting by the time he clattered down that last long flight of stairs.

He stopped, then. Stopped, and stared, with his throat suddenly too small to swallow, and his scalp prickling with something that was closely akin to sheer, stark terror.

Because Ed Quinn wasn't visible within that tiny room. He was nowhere to be seen.

BUT the Maiden was there, still standing in the corner. It seemed as if her grimacing, ugly face had suddenly taken on a feline twist. Smiling, almost. As if she had just finished a full meal.

Stiff-legged, numb, Tom moved across the chamber. There was one thing he wanted to see . . . if his mind would let him look.

Trembling, then, he reached out, gripped the Maiden's great iron door. A door that was closed now, and stiff and hard to move, as if trying by its very obstinacy to hide dark secrets.

Still shaking, he put his back to the task. Heaved with all his might.

With a creak of rusting hinges, the door swung open.

A shudder ran through him. His search was ended. He'd found Ed Quinn.

The little newspaperman was jammed into the Maiden. Ugly, spreading splotches marked the places where the

spikes within the door had driven through him. The phone he'd gripped was smashed and shattered.

Again, Tom McCray shuddered.

But it was not at Ed Quinn. Quinn was dead, and all men some day die. There had been many dead men out there in the islands during the war. Tom could take that, he knew.

But this other, this thing that made him chill and fight for breath . . . he wasn't so sure about that.

Ed Quinn was dead within the Maiden.

And the lashings that held the Maiden open, the cords tight-laced to hold the door, prevent such tragedy—

Those cords were keenly, cleanly slashed!

CHAPTER III

The Tiger's Claws

CLARE KENNEDY always had considered herself a calm, well-integrated person. She had an instinctive distaste for the usual female routine of tears and shrieks and wailings. Hysterical women irritated her nearly as much as they did the average man. True, she had a temper. She knew it. But she knew also that, when occasion demanded, she could control it. She prided herself on her coolness, her objectivity of approach.

Now, with old Holm's body lying here exposed before her in the mummy case, she realized with a shock that she was all woman. Suddenly. Involuntarily. It was pure reflex, something she couldn't help. Her poise was forgotten, her calmness fled. Instinctively she cried out, flung one hand up before her face. Spun away from the hideous sight, clutching for the haven of Tom McCray's broad shoulder.

Only Tom wasn't there.

At first she didn't understand. Blank bewilderment swept over her. She turned again, stared about the room.

He wasn't there.

Unreasoning panic raced through her. She bit at her own hand to hold back the cries. Tottered back. Sank into a chair.

It was absurd, and her brain knew it. There were a hundred reasons Tom might have had for leaving. He wasn't chained to her side.

Only her brain didn't help. She didn't care why he wasn't there; she only knew that she wanted him. Here. Now. Close to her, his arms about her, his broad, good-natured face grinning down while he soothed and comforted. She ached for the warmth, the strength, of him.

The moment was black, abysmal, the room a noisy, hysterical bedlam. She had never felt so all alone. It was as if she were one of those mediaeval angels forever balanced on the point of a needle. Only this needle of hers was miles high, its base veiled in murky mists of madness. She felt like clinging to her chair, as if it were her sole hold on reality, and one fraction's slip would plummet her into the bottomless chasm below.

Then Paul Updike's voice cut through the fog.

"Please, my friends! That mace is from the arms and armor section. Perhaps McCray can tell us about it."

Silence fell over the room. Silence, and a wall of eyes searching for Tom McCray. Clare could feel them—mute, accusing. It was as if it were she, not him, they were condemning.

"He's not here!" Lorimer, the lawyer, lashed in his queer, high-pitched voice. He glowered belligerently at all and sundry. "Gentleman, did you hear me? He's not here!"

"Ve heard you der first time, Lori-

mer," old Mr. Dorstmann grumbled. He pawed at his jewels with a handkerchief. "So he's not here. So vat?"

"That's right, so what?" the burly giant, Young, echoed harshly. "Neither is Quinn, for that matter."

Again, the stares. Clare's heart leaped within her. The weight of the world was suddenly lifted from her shoulders. She didn't try to analyze it. She only knew that somehow, the fact that Quinn, as well as Tom, was missing, buoyed her like a star breaking through the night.

UPDIKE frowned, smoothed his hairline mustache.

"They should be here. They shouldn't have left." He looked up. "I think it would be well under the circumstances if everyone were to stay in this room, unless otherwise authorized. I'll go hunt for Quinn and McCray myself." He looked around. "Dr. Wang, if you'll go to my office and notify the police about poor Holm. . . ."

"Of course." The Chinese bowed acceptance, his bland brown face inscrutable, the black eyes blank. "I shall do as you suggest at once." He moved out the door.

"And now, if the rest of you will make yourselves comfortable . . ." Updike smiled. "I know it's unpleasant to be shut up in the same room with a corpse, but—"

Lorimer whipped his ever-present cigar from his mouth.

"It's more than unpleasant!" he snapped belligerently. "It's more than we'll stand, Updike. I, for one, have no intention—"

"That will be enough, Mr. Lorimer!" Paul Updike clipped icily. "I'm perfectly well aware that you dislike and disapprove of me. However, I have a duty as director of this museum to perform, and I intend to do so. I've stated

that I felt it advisable for all of you to stay here while I search for Quinn and McCray. I hope you'll accede, though I have no force to bring to bear. And now, if you'll excuse me. . . ." He turned with full dignity, left the room.

"You hear that?" Lorimer raged shrilly. "You hear the way he talked to me?" He hurled down the cigar in a blaze of wrath. "I won't stand for it! I'll—"

"You'll shut up and like it!" roared Young, the burly industrialist. "I've had a belly-full of your yapping. Just because you're Mrs. Updike's lawyer—"

The little attorney bristled like a fat, angry kewpie.

"At least, I didn't get my money by swindling the government on cost-plus contracts!" he shrieked. "I didn't buy my way onto the board of this museum—"

"Hey, boys!" Mr. Johnson, the Egyptologist, chided. "After all, we're all in this mess together, an' there's ladies present. Bellowin' like a bunch of bull calves ain't gonna help any."

Lorimer turned on him like a striking rattler.

"Shut up!"

Clare covered her ears, tensed for the blow she felt certain Johnson would strike.

Instead, he sat down, the color draining from his pleasant, leathery face. His lips drew thin against his pipe-stem.

A hand touched Clare's arm. Instinctively, she stiffened, turned sharply in her chair.

It was Miss North, Lorimer's dowdy little secretary. Her perpetually-frightened air had grown to semi-panic, and her pale eyes darted about the room like those of a terrified rabbit.

"Excuse me, please!" She said it in a

rush, as if afraid her motives were in desperate peril of being misconstrued. "I'm so sorry, really. . . ."

"That's all right." The girl's very tremulousness stiffened Clare's backbone. She suddenly felt competent again, able to face the world. "What is it?"

"Er . . . uh . . . Mrs. Updike . . ."

"Yes?" Clare glanced down the table toward the portly dowager. "What about her?"

"She's . . . she's feeling ill, Miss Kennedy. She wants someone to take her to the ladies' room, and I don't know how to get there."

"Of course." Clare rose. "Do you want to come along?"

A NEW wave of panic gripped the other. She rubbed her hands together, palm of right to back of left, as if she were cold. The way she hunched into the worn rabbit-skin collar of her cheap coat furthered the illusion.

"Uh . . . oh, I don't think so, Miss Kennedy. Mr. Lorimer . . . he might want me. If you don't mind. . . ."

Clare tried to bite back a smile.

"Of course." She crossed to where Mrs. Updike sat. "If you'll just come with me, Mrs. Updike—"

"If I'll just come with you!" The elder woman exploded it in a perfect fury. "I said I was sick. I'd be afraid to try to walk any distance. I need help."

Again, Clare repressed a smile. Mrs. Updike might be ill, but her temper certainly wasn't. The old battle-axe's jaw was rockier than ever. Maybe Paul Updike was justified in his search for something more attractive.

The thought reminded her of Tonia Roberts. Turning, she looked about for her.

The sleek brunette was still in her seat across the table, obviously amused

by the entire proceedings. She was making no effort to conceal her smile.

"Tonia?" Clare queried. "If you'd give us a hand—"

"If I gave you a hand, I'd be crazy!" Tonia interrupted with a mocking laugh. "You don't think I'm going prowling around this place in the dark, do you, with some character running loose with a meat axe?"

The thought jarred Clare. Up till now, it somehow hadn't occurred to her. She'd thought of Holm, of course, and felt regret for his death. Yet realization that some human agency was behind that brutal slaying hadn't truly come to her.

Now, with an ugly clarity, she saw it: the old man, harmless and helpless and kind. The strange, dark slayer, lurking in the shadows. The great war mace, rising and falling. . . .

A shudder ran through her. Her throat went tight, her nerves taut. All at once she didn't want to go out into the darkened corridors, either. She wanted to stay here, where it was warm and light, with people all around her. It was the only sensible thing to do, when a killer was still at large. Paul Updike had had a sound reason behind his order that everyone stay together.

"Young woman!" Agatha Updike snapped. "I'm becoming faint. I want to be taken to the ladies' room."

Clare cast one last, desperate glance at Tonia Roberts.

"Tonia, please—"

"Nothing doing, Clare! I value my health more than Mrs. Ritzbitz's there." Tonia waved airily in the dowager's direction.

"I reckon I can give you a hand, Clare," a new voice interrupted. It was Mr. Johnson. He grinned around his pipe. "If you can stand my pipe, that is, Mrs. Updike."

"Hmph!" the other snorted. But she

made no protest as Clare and the Egyptologist took positions on either side of her and helped her to her feet.

IT BECAME obvious, as time went by, that Agatha Updike had nothing more wrong with her than an acute disinclination to listen further to the noise and babble in the board room. Laid out on a couch in the ladies' lounge, with Clare to attend her, and Mr. Johnson returned to the board room, half the length of the building away, she was snoring placidly in a matter of minutes.

Arms akimbo, Clare stared down at her, torn between amusement and irritation. It was with difficulty that she fought down a sudden, tremendous urge to douse the sleeper with a bucket of water.

She was so standing when she heard Paul Updike cry out.

In an instant all her fears were back. Icy fingers were racing up and down her spine, paralysis clutching her in its vice.

Then Updike shouted again.

Clare straightened, turned. She forced her numbing limbs to move. Crossed the room with leaden steps. Opened the door, fingers still trembling.

The director stood half-a-dozen doors away, down the corridor toward the board room. A limp figure sprawled on the polished terrazzo floor beside him.

"It's Johnson!" he called.

Without stopping to think, Clare ran down the hall toward him. Updike was on one knee beside the Egyptologist by the time she reached him.

"He seemes to be all right." The director sounded puzzled. "I came this way looking for Quinn and McCray, and found him here." He glanced up. "Do you have any ideas?"

Clare's first instinctive panic was fading.

"Of course. His heart. Remember? He spoke about it at the meeting." She joined Updike, felt for the Egyptologist's pulse. "I've heard him speak about it before, too, Mr. Updike. He has these attacks quite frequently. Probably the excitement, and then the exertion. . . ." She told the director of his wife's "illness," and of how Johnson had aided in helping her to the lounge.

"So that's it!" Updike smoothed his mustache with supple, skillful fingers. He looked more worried than Clare had ever seen him. "We'll have to get him to a doctor, then, Miss Kennedy. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened, after he'd strained himself helping my wife."

A faint, fragmentary recollection stirred in the back of Clare's mind.

"I know! He has tablets he takes. Probably they're in his desk. . . ."

Updike sprang to his feet.

"I'll go see. If you'll get some water in the meantime—"

"Right now!" Clare scrambled up, hurried back to the lounge, while Updike disappeared up the nearest stairway toward Johnson's office.

Agatha Updike still lay snoring on the couch. The very sight of her—face placid, hands drawn up in grotesque imitation of a sleeping puppy's paws—made Clare bite down hard. Out there in the hall lay Johnson, sprawled on a hard stone floor, perhaps because this woman had been too petty and spoiled and selfish to share a few minutes' inconvenience with the others. Clare clenched her fists in sudden, futile, fury.

Then, remembering her own task, she hastily filled a paper cup with water, hurried back out into the hall.

She stopped so short the paper cup

sloshed over. All at once she found herself breathing faster than she could ever remember having done before. Her heart seemed to be living a weird life all its own.

Because the corridor was blank and bare. Johnson was gone.

A DOZEN explanations leaped to Clare's mind. Perhaps he had recovered from the attack by himself. Perhaps it hadn't been an attack at all; he might have only fainted. Or maybe someone from the board room had found him, carried him back with them.

In any case, she had to know. Already her nerves were leaping. She hurried down to the nearest hallway intersection, looked in all directions. Peered up and down the stair-wells. Ran all the way to the board room itself and looked in.

Mr. Johnson still was not to be seen.

At last there was nothing to do but give up. Slowly, Clare retraced her steps. It dawned on her with a start as she reached the lounge that she was still carrying the sodden paper cup of water.

Momentarily, it broke the tension. In spite of herself, she laughed aloud.

To her surprise, the lounge was dark, the light turned off, although she could still see Mrs. Updike's vague shape on the couch. So the old harridan wouldn't even tolerate a light! Clare's irritation flared anew.

It was still with her, in lesser measure, as she crossed the gloom-shrouded little room to the trash-can by the window. She hung on the verge of shaking the dowager awake, insisting that she go back to the board room with the others. Then sheet lightning blazed through the storm-tossed night outside in a weirdly beautiful display.

It brought back Clare's earlier mood.

Instinctively, she tensed, chilling to the uncanny radiance in the night. She could feel the skin at the back of her neck begin to crawl, the papillae coming erect with nameless fear.

She drew herself erect. Arched her neck and tossed her head with a flurry of auburn hair in a spirited effort to shake off the feeling.

It would not go. The darkness seemed to be closing in on her, engulfing her, seeping into body and mind and soul.

Thunder crashed. Rain swished against the window.

She could never be sure if she really heard the sound. The storm outside made too much noise for that. But suddenly, it seemed, she caught a rustle of garments, the scuff of stealthy footsteps.

The panic seized her, tossed her like a straw in a storm-swept sea. She whirled. Darted to the light-switch by the door. Snapped it on.

She saw it, then, the thing the friendly gloom had shrouded from her view. Saw it, in all its gory, grisly horror.

Agatha Updike still lay on the couch, yes. But she lay there in death, not sleep. Her head was sagging sidewise, her face a twisted mask of torment, her body drenched in blood.

But there was something else, too. Something else, that held Clare's horror-fascinated eyes every bit as tightly as the woman.

A queer, pronged thing lay on Agatha Updike's ample bosom, a thing that was three claws, razor-edged, and set in a narrow grip.

Clare recognized that thing. She'd seen it before, back in the arms and armor section. Tom had showed it to her when it caught her eye. Demonstrated it, even.

"The tiger's claws!" she whispered in a voice she knew was not her own.

"The tiger's claws!"

The tiger's claws, and Agatha Updike with her throat torn out.

CHAPTER IV

Harpoon

THE murderer laughed and rubbed his hands. It was simple, all so simple. You knew the ones you meant to make your victims, but they did not know you. They were sheep, cowering together for protection, stark terror in their eyes. Then, one bolder than the rest—or perhaps, really, more fearful—would break away, step out of the charmed circle long enough for you to strike. He would die, and the others would find him and stare at him, and then cower together again, closer than ever in their panic. But now there would be more than terror in their eyes. There would be suspicion, too—suspicion of everyone and everything. The lurking dread that the one next to them was the one, the killer, the taker-away of life. They looked at you like that, too, wary and frightened, but never knowing, never sure. That was their trouble. They could never be sure, no matter how they tried.

Again, the murderer laughed.

It had gone well, so far. Old Holm's appearance had been as spectacular as any Hollywood production. And as for Agatha Updike . . . He licked his lips inside old Nicolo Renaldi's casque. It had been perfect, a study in sudden death. That stupid girl, Clare Kennedy, had gone scuttling off through the empty, echoing corridors, leaving the old fool unattended. He'd slipped in like a shadow. Crouched there beside her, the claws in his hand. She'd wakened—some instinct, perhaps. Looked up into his eyes through the visor. Probably recognized him, even,

though he'd never know for sure.

He'd waited, then, waited till she sucked in air for that shriek of ultimate terror. Her lips had parted, her mouth opened, her eyes distended. The scream had started, the first taut, soundless rush of breath—

Then he'd struck!

The scream bubbled out through her blood-clogged, shredded windpipe, a liquid mumble not audible ten feet away.

Yes, it had been good. He had enjoyed it, almost, The Murderer thought. It combined so many things: the solution to his problems. The thrill of the chase. The surging sense of strength and power.

Not that it was all so pleasant, of course. There were problems, too, to match the triumph. Peril, balanced against power.

Take Quinn, for instance. And McCray. If he hadn't noticed their absence when he did, anything might have happened. Quinn, especially. Even disabling the phones might not have stopped him. Probably he'd have gone on, tried to leave the building.

No, it was better this way. His was another murder without a motive, another false skein to tangle the police. It had the right flavor, too. Corpse crammed in an Iron Maiden. What more could the tabloids ask?

McCray, of course, remained a problem. The Murderer frowned at the thought. It would have been so much better, so much simpler, if he, too, could have been eliminated. But there was no time to search now. No. There were too many other things to do.

Thoughtfully, The Murderer drew the Chinese mandarin robe about him over the shirt of chain mail. A beautiful thing, that robe. He could admire it even now. The pattern's beauty, the skill and delicacy of the workmanship.

It was worth a minor fortune. He was sorry the blood had splashed upon it. Sorry that he even had to use it. It was like slicing cheese or whittling firewood with Nicolo Renaldi's dagger.

The thought made him smile. He touched the weapon's hilt, where it hung at his side. A dangerous toy, even to carry with him. Old Nicolo's sinister skill made it a master menace. What if he should forget himself and grasp it? Strike a blow, driving those fang-like poisoned needles deep into his hand?

He shuddered. He was a fool to even touch it. Yet it held a fatal fascination, too. In his heart he knew he could never let it leave him. It was too closely bound up with all this deadly business. It had become a symbol, a visible link of kinship between him and that long-dead son of evil.

Still, it would be well to be careful. Gingerly, The Murderer slid it on along his belt, away from any chance contact with his hand. . . .

IT WAS amusing, listening to them weep and wail about old Agatha. As if she had meant anything to any of them, except in terms of trouble. What hypocrites they were!

Then Lorimer cracked, and that was a different matter.

"Maybe the rest of you want to stay here and be slaughtered, but I don't. I'm getting out now, and nobody's going to stop me. And when I get through talking to the police—"

He stomped out, briefcase in hand, dowdy little secretary still at his heels. A bad-tempered, belligerent little man, smoking cigars that stank and venting his ugly disposition in high, shrill, voice. It was a pleasure to see him go.

Or was it? Involuntarily, The Murderer stiffened. "And when I get through talking to the police—," he'd

said. Could he suspect? Was it possible that he knew the truth? After all, he had that damning document, even if only in draft. If he took it to the police, pointed out its meaning, showed its implications . . . The Murderer shuddered. Anything might happen. Anything!

Red panic raced through The Murderer. It was danger such as he'd never dreamed. He had to act, had to forestall it.

Old Dorstmann saved him the trouble.

"He iss right!" the old man rumbled. "Ve are fools to stay. Let us all go."

In an instant, they were rushing out into the hall, all of them, screaming to Lorimer to wait for them.

"But Tom McCray—!" the Kennedy girl cried. "I won't let you go without him!"

As one, they glowered at her. She paid them no heed, raced ahead to Lorimer, clutched at his arm, pleading with him.

It was The Murderer's chance. He whirled, ran like a hungry tiger on the trail of a deer. . . .

THERE was a window on the ground floor, close beside the museum's front steps. The Murderer wrenched it open, cursed the driving rain that blew through into his face and blurred his view. But it was an ideal ambush. He could ask no more.

He could hear their voices, faintly: the girl, still pleading. Lorimer, angry and adamant. The others' low buzz, as they tried to make their decision.

Then Lorimer's voice rose shrilly. The *splat* of his shoes on the rain-drenched steps came echoing.

The Murderer brought up his weapon.

It was a queer thing, and deadly. A harpoon gun, with a short, barbed

spear projecting from its barrel, a reel of heavy line slung beneath. It had killed seals at long ranges; surely it would stop a man mere feet away! The Murderer had hand-loaded the shell himself for safety's sake.

Lorimer came into view, his secretary at his side. They scurried through the rain like twin ghosts, one short and fat, the other hunched and thin.

The Murderer sucked in his breath, struggled to still the pounding of his heart. It was this way always, it seemed. No matter how he tried, his nerves betrayed him in the final crisis.

Lorimer was only ten feet away. As close as he would get.

The Murderer drew his bead. Braced himself. Squeezed the trigger.

The stock slammed back against his shoulder, almost toppling him. Never had he fired a gun with such a kick. It paralyzed his whole right side.

But Lorimer—Hastily, The Murderer flung the gun aside, peered out the window.

The stubby lawyer was still on his feet, staggering and reeling, trying to claw at his back with his right hand. The left still gripped the briefcase.

Exaltation surged through The Murderer. He snatched at the line. Heaved with all his might.

Lorimer gave a shrill scream of agony. Reeled backward off the walk toward the sunken ground-floor window. Pitched through it bodily, into the room.

The Murderer glimpsed the dowdy little secretary's pinched white face in a lightning flash as, terror-straight, she tottered back toward the steps. But she was not important. He cared nothing about her. All he wanted was Lorimer, and the document.

He finished the lawyer with one sharp blow of a Sac tomahawk. He wasn't even sure that was necessary. Lorimer

had landed hard on his bald head on the concrete floor, with a sound like a cracking melon. Even the harpoon itself probably would have been enough.

Then, into the briefcase, into the pockets. The Murderer fumbled, cursed, fumbled again.

It took him almost a minute to find it. It was in the breast pocket, two thin sheets of legal onionskin, typed single space.

Relief, triumph, exaltation—he felt them all. In one sweep of motion he wadded them, jammed them deep into his own pocket. The room echoed as he laughed aloud.

It was then he heard the footsteps. Thunderous footsteps, clattering in the corridor outside this room.

Again, panic. The Murderer spun, then momentarily froze. It couldn't be. He planned too well. Worked too hard. He *wouldn't* be stopped now.

More by reflex than intent, he started for the door to the next room. He'd go through it, and on, through the whole chain. Come out, at last, in the end corridor.

He'd taken two short steps when the door burst open.

Again, The Murderer froze.

Young, the burly giant with the boxer's jaw, came hurtling down upon him.

CHAPTER V

The Renaldi Casque

THOSE slashed lashings seemed to hold a horrid, hideous fascination for Tom McCray. He stood staring at them for more minutes than he could tell.

They spelled murder, of course. Murder, and nothing else but murder.

Ed Quinn had come down here to

The Dungeon to use this phone. That was plain enough.

But someone else had come, too. Someone who didn't want word of what was going on in the museum to seep out to the papers and to the police. Someone who wanted his own sinister brand of privacy while dark deeds were done.

He'd found Quinn in the Maiden, busy with the phone. He'd slipped up, slashed the cords, watched the great iron door slam shut. . . .

Tom shivered in spite of himself. His lips were suddenly dry, his tongue too thick. His stomach twisted, and he was afraid he was going to be ill.

Stubbornly, he fought the feeling down. Forced himself to go on.

One of the Mexican throwing knives he'd left here this afternoon lay on the floor beside the Maiden, mute testimony to what had happened. Dully, Tom bent to pick it up.

"Hold it!" a voice behind him rasped.

For an instant he froze. Then, slowly, straightened. Turned.

Young, the burly, six-foot-three industrialist, stood menacing him with an antique French battle-axe.

The big man scowled.

"I had a notion you'd bear watching," he announced grimly. "You slipped out in too much of a hurry to suit me, and then I couldn't find you, so I came here. But now—" He gestured toward the Maiden, with its grisly contents. "That's that. You're done, McCray. I've got you dead to rights."

Tom wondered, later, if his face showed the way he felt.

He couldn't comprehend it, at first. Then, as the truth dawned on him, he went rigid with shock. For a moment he was even afraid to speak, for fear his voice would tremble.

"I hope I don't get *you* right," he said finally.

The other waved his battle-axe.

"Quit stalling. You killed him and I caught you, and that's that." He sneered. "Or do you want to pretend you only found the body?"

Involuntarily, Tom knotted his fists. He could feel the hot wave of anger sweep up his face.

"What do you think?" he snapped. "Why would I want to kill him?"

Young sneered again.

"How should I know? But you're here, with the body, and a knife in your hand. Those ropes are cut, so that door can slam shut and kill whoever's inside." He swung his weapon. "That's enough for me, McCray. You can argue with the cops."

A strange, sinking feeling crept into the pit of Tom McCray's stomach. He could visualize just about what the police would say. Their reactions, their suspicions. They'd play up the fact that this was his section, that he was the one who had the easiest access to it. They'd magnify Young's testimony. By the time they were through, they'd practically have the big man saying he'd seen Tom cut the cords.

And yet, what was there to do? What other answers could he give?

"Come on!" Young snarled.

There, on the floor at Tom's feet, lay the Mexican throwing knife. With it. . .

"Touch that knife and I'll bash your brains out!" the big man grated angrily. "I said come on!"

Somewhere below them, a shot thundered like an exclamation point.

The menace dropped from the giant's face. His mouth fell open.

"What—?"

"Don't you see?" Tom let the full fire of his fury run wild. "Don't you get it, you simpleton? While you're

standing here playing games with me, The Murderer is down below, on the ground floor, killing someone else!"

He had to give Young credit for one thing: when the big man made up his mind, he acted fast.

One instant, he was standing there, staring blankly at Tom. The next, he was taking the stairs five at a time, sprinting toward the sound of that shot.

Tom raced after him. Up the stairs from The Dungeon. Down the corridor. Down the other stairs to the ground floor.

But with every step, Tom fell behind. He didn't have a chance against the other's mighty strides. He was just turning the last corner when he saw Young disappear through a doorway midway down the hall.

In a final spurt, Tom reached it, snatched at the knob.

Then, with a bruising thud, he came up short, half-dazed by the shock and impact. Again, he rattled the knob. Beat on the panels with all his might.

It was to no avail. The door was locked.

THERE were sounds inside the room.

Queer sounds Tom could not place. A swish that might be rain in an open window. Faint clankings, as of cans banging together. The scrape of feet.

Tom remembered that a side door led from this room to the next. He doubled back.

The other room's hall door was locked, too.

In a frenzy, Tom hurled himself back at the first door. Battered it with furious, numbing fists.

Then, suddenly, Dr. Wang was at his elbow, smooth brown face impassive, eyes as black and expressionless as his hair.

"You are having . . . difficulties?" No emotion. No curiosity, really. Just a

statement with a question mark.

"Young's in there!" Tom blurted out. The way he said it sounded a little melodramatic, even in his ears.

Dr. Wang stood very straight, hands folded across his stomach, bland face a study in polite attentiveness.

"Indeed?"

"Indeed vat?" another voice broke in. It was Dorstmann, lower lip out-thrust, glowering balefully as he waddled up. "Dot shot—it from down here came, *ja?*"

"That's right!" joined in Johnson, the Egyptologist, from behind the fat man. "There was the shot, an' then Lorimer went down and back through the window. I reckon this is the room."

A strange feeling of unreality gripped Tom. Something was wrong, yet he couldn't put his finger on it. It was tearing his self-control to shreds.

Maybe it was the variety of their reactions. He couldn't be sure. At least, it was a possibility.

Murder had been done. That they all knew. He, for one, had come racing down here, hot on Big Young's heels, ready for anything. Yet when he got here, he was faced by this blank door—heavy, impenetrable.

And the others. Their expressions. The way they spoke. The things they did. Wang, bland and polite as if this were a women's club tea. Dorstmann, waddling about glowering, muttering to himself in that barbarous, guttural, Teutonic accent. Johnson, calm and cheery, pipe still gripped between his teeth.

Tom McCray wanted to scream in their faces.

Instead, he forced himself to hold his voice low and level.

"Look: Young's in there. We heard that shot, too. I don't know what's going on, but I think we better kick that door down. Quick!"

"Indeed?" Dr. Wang remarked again.

"Indeed!" Tom rapped. He couldn't quite keep the anger from his voice. "Now! Come on!"

He spun toward the door.

The next instant, before he could take another step, the knob turned. There was a sound of fumbling at the lock.

Then, jerkily, the door came open.

THE burly Young stood framed in the doorway. He was tottering, his hands shaking like those of a man who has passed the limits of exhaustion.

But that was not the thing that mattered. Tom did not even notice it in that first, incredible moment. He was too busy staring at the other—the thing on Young's big head.

It was a helmet, a casque, of Renaissance Italian vintage. Tom recognized it instantly. It came from the collection in his section.

Young was making queer, choked sounds. He leaned against the door jamb for support, as if his shaking legs would barely hold him up. Feebly, he clawed at the casque.

Tom caught it first.

"That casque! The damned thing's choking him! It's too tight around his neck!"

He started forward, then leaped back, away.

As a great tree falls, Young crashed to the floor.

Tom dropped beside him, fumbled for the helmet's hooks, the little metal latches that held the neckpiece's pivoted front section to the back.

The hooks would not move.

"Quick! Give me a hand!" He heaved at Young's body. The others joined in. They turned the giant over. Tom bent, scrutinized the catches.

He could feel the sweat start, then.

His mouth went dry, and his hands shook. The horror, the enormity, of the thing twisted with chill fingers at his vitals.

Those hooks had been squeezed shut, with a pair of pliers, probably. Without tools, there was no way of getting them open again.

Like a man in a fog, he heard someone cursing aloud. Realized, with a kind of baffled awe, that it was his own voice.

Desperately, Tom bent again. He clutched at the lower edge of the neckpiece. Tried to tear it away by sheer force.

But old Nicolo Renaldi's armorer, Zenon, had builded well. He had known the strains to which that helmet might some day be subjected. Now, the joints creaked, and the metal twisted a fraction, but still the body of the casque held firm.

"Tools!" Tom gasped. "And for the love of God, hurry!"

Again, he attacked the hooks.

It was hopeless. They would not give. He broke both blades of his pocket-knife trying.

Then, at last, someone was shoving a kit in front of him. He snatched up a screwdriver, lunged at the catches as if they were human adversaries.

They gave, finally. Stubbornly, he pried them open, one by one. Tugged once more at the neckpiece.

Creaking, it pulled open.

They saw it, then: the rainbow strip of cloth, ripped from a Chinese mandarin robe and wound tight around the big man's neck, so that the added pressure of the casque would surely strangle him.

But seeing it did no good. It was too late for that. The giant's face was sagged and black, his pulse a vanished thing.

Young was dead.

DR. WANG spoke first.

"Is it not interesting, Mr. McCray, how always the items from your section are involved in these ghastly crimes?"

Tom drew a ragged, painful breath.

"And your presence here, too, Mr. McCray—that, also, is interesting."

"Ja!" Dorstmann rumbled. "Ja. Dot ve like to know about, too!"

Slowly, Tom came erect. His temples were throbbing, his anger a jet of flame.

"And who the hell are you to ask questions?" he lashed out. "Arms and armor's my section. Why wouldn't it be involved?"

"Y'know, boys, I think he's got something there," Johnson, the gaunt, pleasant-faced Egyptologist joined in. "I reckon if I planned to do any murdering, I'd go to arms an' armor for the tools." He chuckled. "As for him bein' here—well, what have we got to say? I doubt we could account for our own time too well."

"Ach! Ve vere together!" Dorstmann exploded. "All of us, upstairs."

"Sure, I guess we were," Johnson nodded. "Still, I can't say's I remember seein' either of you." He poked his pipe at them. "As a matter of fact, gents, I'll tell you cold turkey I don't remember either of you even bein' upstairs. I came down here in a rush, an' here you were. Just like that."

"Ach—!" Dorstmann rumbled again.

But Dr. Wang interrupted before he could go further.

"Perhaps you were right, Mr. Johnson. There was the hurry, the confusion. . . ."

"Sure," Johnson agreed, nodding. "I know just what you mean. But there is one thing I'd like to know, an' maybe some of you can help me."

"Gladly, Mr. Johnson." The Chinese bowed.

"What I want to know is this," Johnson went on grimly. "All of us turned up here. Fine. That's about what you'd expect.

"But where is Paul Updike?"

The question—blunt, to the point—was like a bomb bursting among them. Blankly, they stared at each other.

"I don't know," Tom said finally.

And Dorstmann: "*Nein.*"

"Nor I," said Dr. Wang.

"I thought not," nodded Johnson. "Y'know, boys, I reckon that sounds sort of peculiar to me. I figure the director of a museum oughta be about the first one down on a deal like this."

SILENCE settled over them. No one seemed to have anything to say.

Tom broke it, at last.

"We'd be better off to look around instead of just talking," he suggested.

"Right as rain," Johnson agreed. "This room Young came out of ought to be as good a place to start as any."

They didn't find much. At least, not much helpful. Only the harpoon gun, and Lorimer's corpse, and the battle-axe Young had carried.

The door to the next room was still open, an arrow to point the murderer's flight.

"This accomplishes nothing, gentlemen," said Wang. "The killer has gone. We would be wise to leave all this to the police."

"Not a bad idea, partner," Johnson agreed. "Not bad, that is, if they ever come. You said yourself the phones are out."

"But we can go ourselves, can we not?"

"Can we?" The Egyptologist's face broke into a grin. "I wonder about that. Lorimer tried to leave, and you see what he got."

"Ja—!" echoed Dorstmann. "*Ja!*"

A sudden, irritated streak of stub-

bornness flared in Tom McCray.

"The three of you can go on talking if you want to," he snapped. "Personally, I'm going to follow this chain of open doors and see what I find."

"All right," Johnson agreed amiably. "This isn't my day to be particular." He followed Tom through room after room, all empty, all deserted.

In the corridor, finally, Tom stopped.

"I'm licked," he admitted. "I was hoping we'd find something, but it doesn't look like we're going to."

Johnson chuckled.

"Oh, I don't know." He bent to knock the dottle from his pipe. Stiffened suddenly. "Tom, I reckon we found something after all. Over there—under that table!"

There was something about the tone of his voice, the way the hand with which he pointed trembled, that sent tension leaping through Tom McCray like a wounded stag. He whirled.

"Where?" He searched the shadows.

"Right here, partner." Johnson shuffled forward, gave him a hand.

There was a man under the table. Together, they dragged him out. He was limp, dead weight.

Then, still together, they stared.

The man was Paul Updike. A great gash laid open the skin along the side of his head.

Even as they watched, he opened his eyes. His voice the faintest of whispers, he spoke.

"On the stairs . . . the killer . . . Chinese robe . . ."

He sagged back into unconsciousness again.

CHAPTER VI

Mictlantecutli

GRIPPED tight by fright's paralysis, Clare Kennedy stood frozen

there by Agatha Updike's stiffening, blood-sodden corpse through a mad eternity of shock. Her flesh crawled with horror. Her brain gyrated giddily. Nausea and fear and loathing washed over her in waves.

Then, suddenly, another spear of lightning lanced down outside.

It broke her spell in one shrill scream of panic. She was beyond logic, beyond reason, swallowed up by an abyss of sickening terror. Her world was all at once a place of dark shadows and swirling mists. Heedless, unthinking, she flew out of the lounge, down the hall toward the board room.

Ahead, a gaunt, familiar figure loomed.

"Mr. Johnson! Mr. Johnson—!" Babbling, incoherent, weak with fright, she caught at him, clung to him. In that moment of mingled terror and relief, she honestly had no recollection of her other, earlier panic, brief minutes before, at finding him vanished from the corridor. "Mr. Johnson, she's dead!"

Afterwards, she could not remember what he did to soothe her. Only the bite of his bony fingers into her shoulders, the drone of his soft Texas drawl in her ears.

She got it out, finally, the whole, grisly story, and with it came remembrance. Instinctively, she stiffened, stared at him wide-eyed. Again her brain became a mad millrace of terror and suspicion.

"You—you were in the hall! Then you disappeared!"

Johnson's mouth twisted in a wry smile.

"Sorry, Clare. I didn't know you'd run into me while I was having my little spell." He hesitated, then plunged on. "I reckon I've told you about my heart being bad? Well, I never know just when it's going to knock me over. Fi-

nally the doctor gave me some nitroglycerin tablets to carry with me. Whenever I feel myself going, I stick one of 'em under my tongue. That brings me back around." He chuckled. "That's what happened tonight. After we'd hauled the late lamented Mrs. Updike down to the ladies' room, I began to get those old, familiar pains in my chest. I just managed to get a tablet in my mouth, and that's the last I remember."

"But . . . then . . ."

"You mean, where'd I go?" He fumbled in his tweed coat's pocket for his pipe. "Well, the way I figure it, I must have come to again just about the time you left me. All of a sudden I found myself wanting a drink of good, cool water more'n anything in the world, an' the nearest bubbler was down on the next floor. I must have been out of my head to do it right after an attack, that way, but I went down and got my drink. Then I came back up here."

"I see," Clare said.

Only the trouble was, she didn't. Even in her present state, it didn't make sense. If he'd wanted a drink, the men's and ladies' lounges were only a few feet away. Further, there was the time element. For him to coordinate his movements so with hers would be little short of a miracle.

And tonight wasn't her night to believe in miracles.

Johnson chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad we've got that straight, anyhow." He took her arm. "Now we better get on down here."

Clare forced a smile. Suddenly, it was all she could do to keep from screaming at his touch.

"Yes. Yes, we had."

BUT before they could move, she caught the echoing clatter of foot-

steps on the stairs. Her reaction in itself was enough to tell her how taut her nerves were keyed. Involuntarily, without thinking, she whirled, searching the shadows for the newcomer.

It was Paul Updike.

"Miss Kennedy, I can't find a thing in his desk—" And then, seeing Johnson: "What? You're up again?"

Johnson nodded, gave Updike the same explanation he had Clare. She watched the director out of the corner of her eye as he received it. Saw his brows draw together a fraction, his lips straighten and thin.

It came to her, then, that he did not yet know of his wife's death.

The thought brought a new wave of sickness rolling over her. She felt as if she were shrivelling, her whole body contracting. She could remember no task she had hated so.

But she had no choice. Hesitantly, she told him what had happened.

For a moment she thought he was going to faint. The color drained from his face. He stopped short, braced himself against the wall. His whole body was trembling.

"She's . . . you're sure she's dead?" His voice was breaking, jumping octaves.

"Yes." She forced herself to say it. "It—it was horrible. She . . . no one could have lived."

She watched him draw himself together, and the strength he showed surprised her. She'd never liked him. Had considered him a mildly loathesome parasite, in fact, what with his obvious nepotism and his brazenly-conducted affair with Tonia Roberts. Yet now, he rallied in a manner that would have done credit to a better man. His jaw hardened, and the lip beneath the thin hairline mustache ceased to quiver.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I never loved her, but she was a good woman.

It's too bad it had to come this way." And then: "I think it's obvious, now. There's a madman loose in the museum. Possibly some member of the staff or the board, even. It's essential that we stay together till the police arrive. Otherwise, no telling what may happen."

But Johnson was staring at him peculiarly.

"Don't reckon you'd have any witnesses to where you was these last few minutes, would you?" he drawled.

Clare started in spite of herself. Waited for Updike's reaction.

The director's face went even paler. His fists clenched.

"And may I ask what you mean by that question, Mr. Johnson?"

The gaunt man shrugged.

"It's clear enough, I reckon. Your wife's dead. That puts you in line for a lot of money."

Updike shook like a leaf. Clare could see the knots of angry muscle behind his jaws.

"If it weren't for your heart, Mr. Johnson, I'd hit you even though you're an old man." A pause. "However, it may interest you to know that my wife's will leaves half her estate to me, half to the museum. She'd publicly stated, though, that as soon as certain of her investments matured next month, she was going to change it to leave the museum only twenty-five per cent. So if I were going to murder her, I certainly should have waited a few days and gotten the benefit of that change."

Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked away.

CLARE hardly knew what went on in the board room. They were there, all of them, or almost all. All but the one who really mattered.

Tom McCray. Even the thought of him sent warmth surging through her,

made her heart beat faster. She closed her eyes, visualizing his broad, good-natured face. The brown hair, so nondescript and unruly. The strength of him, bulwark against a hostile world.

She caught the babble of frenzied conversation about her only by snatches. Dr. Wang, informing them that all the phones were out of order. Mr. Lorimer, the lawyer, ranting and raving. Mr. Dorstmann, agreeing it was best they all should leave the museum while there yet was time.

It was a nightmare come to life. They were going to leave—and Tom McCray was still here, somewhere in this echoing marble tomb, maybe living, maybe dead.

She acted by reflex.

"No! You can't leave! Not without Tom!" She ran after Lorimer, threw herself in front of him. "You've got to find Tom! You've got to!"

He shoved her aside. Miss North, his dowdy little secretary, brushed past her, apologetic—and hurrying.

Half gasping, half sobbing, she clung to a window sill for support. She could hear the others, still arguing, still debating, their voices shrill with hysteria. In their panic they were straggling, separating, doing the very thing of which they were afraid.

Then Lorimer was on the steps, Miss North still at his side. Together, they hurried out into the wind and rain of the night.

The next instant a shot rang out.

CLARE saw Lorimer stagger. A flickering line of shadow seemed to connect him with the building. She watched him reel, then lurch from the steps, pitch through a cellar—ground floor, really—window with a sodden sound.

His secretary screamed. Poised, for a second, on the brink of flight. Then,

as panic apparently overwhelmed her, she turned, scurried back up the steps into the building.

The lobby was a madhouse. Someone shouted, "Come on!" and the remaining men raced away, down the stairs.

The North girl—if girl you could call her; she was surely thirty—burst into hysterics. Her thin voice turned to a keening wail. She screamed like a lunatic's child.

Clare ran to her. Slapped her twice across the face, hard.

Miss North stopped dead in mid-shriek. Her faded eyes went wide. Her hand came up, touching first one cheek, then the other.

"You—you hit me!" The hysteria was suddenly gone from her voice. She sounded like a frightened, unhappy little girl.

"I'm sorry." Clare meant it. The fear in the other's eyes so dwarfed her own that she could feel nothing but pity. "Frankly—"

"Yes, yes. I know." The secretary's head bobbed up and down. Her thin shoulders hunched, drew even closer together, till the cheap fur of her collar pressed against her pinched, unhappy face. "You had to do it. I know."

"Don't let her kid you," Tonia Roberts said. "Red-heads love to slap people. They do it just for the fun of it."

Clare jumped in spite of herself. She hadn't realized Tonia was anywhere near. A spark of anger flared within her, but she couldn't think of anything to say. She knew it was only her outraged nerves, so she tried to let it die.

"Your purse," Tonia said to the North girl. She held out a worn, bulky bag. "You dropped it on the steps."

"Oh, thank you!" the other breathed. Yet somehow, there was a strange lilt of panic in her voice, as if she still hung on the verge of headlong flight. Clare

eyed her sharply. Glimpsed something frightful and unnerving far behind the faded eyes.

Tonia was eyeing her, too, Clare noted. The sultry brunette's manner was out of character. It was as if she had suddenly begun to act a role.

"What do you say we go downstairs to the ground floor and see whether we can find the men?" Tonia suggested. A visible shudder ran through her. "I don't like staying up here alone, and after seeing what happened to Lorimer, I know I'm not going to try to leave." Her effort to make her voice light, her manner gay, was so obvious as to be painful.

Clare started to agree. The rain, the night, the shadows—they played on her nerves, rubbed her hidden fears raw. She wanted to be with people, out of the darkness, away from the storm.

But Miss North answered before she could speak.

"No! No! I won't go. I don't want to go down there!" Again, hysteria was creeping into her tones. She gripped Clare's wrist. "You won't leave me, will you? You won't make me go?"

IT TOUCHED Clare, though she wasn't sure why. She found herself answering almost before she knew what she was doing.

"Of course not. I'll stay with you." And, to Tonia: "Stay here, Tonia. We're together, and the men will come back . . ."

"Suit yourself." Tonia shrugged, swung her hips. "I'm going." She turned away.

"Tonia—"

Miss North's fingers bit into Clare's wrist harder than ever.

"Let her go!" she whispered breathlessly. "Don't stop her. I'm afraid

of her."

"Afraid of her?" Clare stared. "What do you mean?"

The other's voice dropped even lower. Her pinched, white face was a mask of fear.

"I know who killed them!"

Clare's heart stopped beating.

"You . . . know?"

"Yes, of course. I've got it all here, in my notebook." The girl gestured with her bulky bag.

"Then—?"

"No. Not here." A tremor ran through the other's thin body. "He might be here, anywhere, in the shadows, listening—"

To one side loomed the Aztec Alcove, a narrow, slot-like place with its pantheon of strange, dark gods rising in sinister array along a ledge ten feet above the floor.

"In the Alcove, then?" Clare said, trying to keep the tremor from her own voice. She could not analyze her feelings. Half of her was fear, the other half curiosity insatiate. Yet somewhere along the line there were other things, too—doubts, and questions, and maybe even some queer masochistic urge.

The other cast one frightened glance, nodded wordlessly. Together, they crossed the lobby, took their stand far back, beneath the hideous, three-foot green stone image of Mictlantecutli, skeleton god of the dead, flanked by his gruesome, graven fellows—Ilamatecutli, Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatli, Xiuhtecutli, Teoyaoimqui, a score of others, all looming like monsters high on their ledge.

"We're alone here," Clare said. "You can tell me whatever you want to. No one can hear."

Fearfully, the other looked around, a pitiful, panicky little figure. Her hands were ceaselessly busy in some

twisted private pattern.

"If he finds out—"

Impatience gripped Clare.

"He won't find out. Tell me!"

Perhaps there was a sound, she thought afterward. Or perhaps it was some sixth sense, warning her, tensing her for the leap away.

But something, somehow, made her tear her eyes away from that pinched white face. Made her look up, toward the ledge above.

She caught it with the corner of her eye. Even glimpsed that garish, grotesque figure in the Renaldi casque and mandarin robe behind the image.

Mictlantecutli, god of the dead, was tottering, hanging on the ledge's edge.

She screamed as the man in the mask gave the final shove. Hurling herself away by reflex.

Mictlantecutli fell.

She could see Miss North's head jerk up, face white, eyes wide. Could see the idol plummeting, striking, crushing the North girl's shriek into the marble floor.

For one mad moment she would have sworn the dark god leered and slavered, as if at last his lust for blood again were sated.

Then the figure in the mandarin robe and gleaming helmet was sliding over the edge of the ledge, dropping to the floor.

This once, Clare did not scream. There was no time for screaming.

She ran for her life, instead. Ran, as she had never run before. Ran—with death panting at her heels!

CHAPTER VII

Prelude to Panic

A TAUT, chill knot kept gathering in The Murderer's midriff, in spite of his control.

For a while, he could fight it down. Again, the sense of power, of triumph, would well within him. Then, out of nowhere, the knot would leap back, colder and tighter than ever.

He couldn't understand it, at first. He'd had some narrow squeaks, true. But always he'd succeeded. Even when that burly giant, Young, had hurtled down upon him, he'd managed to get partially away. The very force and fury of Young's rush had helped him. The big man couldn't stop. It had given The Murderer time to strike his blow, hard to the base of the giant's brain. Young had gone down like a pole-axed ox.

Even now, The Murderer smiled at the stroke of genius that followed. It had come to him in one wild flash. In his mind's eye he'd seen those others' horror, their confusion. And old Nicolo—ah, Nicolo would have laughed till he split at the very thought. It was worthy of a Renaldi; the use of his casque so sinisterly appropriate.

Hastily, he'd ripped away a strip from the hem of the mandarin robe. Then, as quickly, bound it tight around Young's neck, layer on layer, till it was all he could do to jam the helmet shut. His fingers had fumbled, he remembered, as he closed and pinched and twisted the hooks. Reaction, probably. Fear that the giant would return to consciousness too quickly.

But he'd finished in time. He was already on his feet before Young stirred. He hadn't waited, after that—just fled out the open door as quickly as he could, before some fool got the idea of cutting him off.

Yes, he had triumphed, just as he had later, up there in the Aztec Alcove, lying flat on his belly along the ledge while the Kennedy girl and that dowdy little secretary of Lorimer's stood shivering, and Mictlantecutli went crashing

down.

It has been a messy business, that. He hadn't liked any part of it. Yet what was there for him to do? He'd had to have the notebook; it was too good a clue, too clear a pointer for the police to follow. He'd been a stupid fool not to realize in the first place that the whole thing would have been dictated.

Wearing the helmet, the casque, had been bad, too. Worse than watching Mictlantecutli hit, even. Except for old Nicolo, he'd never have risked the chance in stealing it back again, after it had been pried from about Young's neck. At the time, of course, it had seemed infinitely appropriate—essential, in fact. But now that he had it, he could hardly bear to wear it. The stink of the dead man's sweat and breath still clung within it, stifling him, shutting him in like a claustrophobiatic.

With a curse, he flung the visor wide, sucked fresh air in hungrily.

It did no good. The taut, chill knot was back again. His head felt light and giddy. It was hard for him to swallow.

Perhaps it was Young's blow. Probably he shouldn't even be up right now. All this exertion. . . .

But no. He couldn't stop now. He had to act, to finish off this whole devilish business.

The notebook. That was the first item.

Painfully, he bent, retrieved the North girl's handbag. The notes were here, she'd said.

He unsnapped the bag. Pawed through it. Then again, faster. Faster! Spilled the contents to the floor, turned the whole thing inside out.

There was no notebook. It wasn't there.

The Murderer's brain was a spinning centrifuge, his very senses reeling. The knot in his stomach kept growing,

swelling, expanding, with every drumming, thunderous beat of his heart. Its icy tentacles reached out to every cell and fiber of his being—numbing, paralyzing.

"No!" he choked. "No! It has to be here!"

But it wasn't. It was gone.

Suddenly, he wanted nothing quite so much as to open his mouth and scream.

The Murderer was afraid.

HE TRACED it to Dorstmann, finally.

Tonia had had it briefly, of that he felt sure. Probably, though, she hadn't realized its significance. Perhaps she hadn't even read it. There was no reason to give the thing undue importance. It was quite within the realm of possibility that she'd merely wanted a scrap of paper and, when she picked up the bag from where Miss North had dropped it on the steps, had taken the notebook then.

But she didn't have it now. Thanks to her skin-tight dresses, he could at least be certain of that.

He decided, finally, that she must have left it in her bag, just as the North girl had kept it in hers. And Tonia's bag was in the board room, laying on the center table. She'd told him so herself. Even mentioned that she'd forgotten it after she'd come up from the ground floor with the others. That meant she'd been carrying it when she was there by the steps.

Only now, old Dorstmann was in the board room. He'd locked the door, refused to open it to anyone until the police came. The panic in the old man's voice, talking through the thick panel, would have been amusing any time but now. And now, he, himself, was too tense-drawn to think of anything but fear.

At last he figured a solution. Hurried again to the arms and armor section.

The thing he sought was long and slim and deadly. A spear, it appeared to be, a needle-pointed spear, with a stiff rattan loop joined to it three inches behind the head, the free end running through an eyelet to the handle.

A ventilator served the board room and the chamber next to it jointly. By standing on a chair in this second room, The Murderer could thrust his weapon through the grillwork into the board room. Further, luck favored him: old Dorstmann sat facing the door, back to the ventilator, his bulbous, sagging body trembling.

Tonia's bag lay on the table behind him.

FOR the fraction of a second, The Murderer debated letting him go. After all, one frightened old man. . . . Then, grimly, he steeled himself again. The chance was too good, the effect too shocking. Dorstmann was locked in this room, alone. The windows were sealed. If he were slaughtered now—The Murderer found himself chuckling. A measure of his old confidence, his courage, was coming back to him. Yes, he would do it. The police would be baffled, and Nicolo would laugh.

Cautiously, he slid the long pole out into the room. Worked the rattan loop a time or two to be sure it was running freely.

Dorstmann shifted uneasily in his chair, the fat flesh wriggling beneath the clothes. Dorstmann, The Murderer thought, was the one man with whom he was acquainted who could make a two-hundred-dollar suit of clothes look like it came from Ten-Dollar Tom's within five minutes after he put it on.

Carefully, The Murderer maneuvered.

Held the needle-pointed tip of the pole precisely over Dorstmann's head, the rattan loop extended.

He hesitated, then. Considered again. After all, he could use this tool of terror just as well to filch the bag.

Suddenly, before he could decide, some flicker of movement seemed to catch the old man's eye. His head jerked back. He screamed.

The Murderer moved instinctively. He brought the looped pole down in one tight move, the rattan circling Dorstmann's neck. The hand which clutched the noose's loose end jerked viciously.

Dorstmann's whole body twitched in a momentary spasm. The Murderer could feel it like an electric shock as the needle-pointed head bit through the fat of the old man's neck, drove on into the spine.

It was over, then, and Dorstmann lay sprawled before his chair, dead fat, like some great slug.

The Murderer's hands were trembling, slippery wet with sweat. His breath came harsh and shallow, through his mouth.

When finally he had stilled his nerves, he began maneuvering again. Skillfully, he moved the loop to grip the bag. Dragged it back, inch by inch, through the narrow ventilator. Clutched it shakily in a sudden new spasm of fear to let it go.

He had it, then. Still breathing hard, oblivious to all else, he jerked it open. Pawed again as he had with the one that belonged to dead Miss North.

And as with hers, his heart went stiff inside him. Once more the cold knot gripped him. New waves of panic lanced through his brain.

Tonia's bag, like the other, contained no notebook.

DESPERATELY, he forced himself to stop and think. Tried to calcu-

late his error.

For an instant he wondered if perhaps the Kennedy girl could have had the notes. Then, as quickly, shoved it aside. He'd heard the things that Miss North said. Knew that she still thought she had the book.

Or could Lorimer himself have taken it? Might it have been in the briefcase, buried in the mass of miscellaneous papers?

Or. . . . Involuntarily, he shook his head. Tried to fight down the thought that came.

But it came anyhow. Like the throb of a living heart, or the pulse of a wireless impulse, it surged through him.

Or. . . . could someone else have taken it? Was there another who knew his secret? Had all this been in vain?

The very questions, he thought, were worthy the genius of Nicolo Renaldi.

If it were true. . . . He shuddered. And then, forcing himself to face it: if it were true, he was back at the beginning, faced again with a situation obviously intolerable. He had killed in vain. He might as well call the police, give up voluntarily.

Only he couldn't. In his heart, he knew he couldn't. He would go on as he had gone, come what may, slaying for silence.

With a start, he realized he was sighing aloud.

Because that was the way it was with murder. He'd heard it, of course, but he'd never quite brought himself to believe it. You started with one killing, and thought that would be the end of it. Instead, it turned out to be only a core—a pebble, snowballing into an avalanche.

He thought back, through the eons, to that fatal moment when his mace struck down old Holm. Again, he sighed. It had seemed so simple then. He would kill ruthlessly, right and left,

veiling his motive in a cloud of corpses.

Only now— He shook his head. Turned slowly to go.

Dr. Wang said: "Ah, the New Guinea man-catcher? I salute you, sir. Only a genius at murder ever would have thought of using it."

The Murderer froze. His world was tumbling down, his house of cards collapsing. He tried to speak, but no words came.

Dr. Wang's smooth face had never been more bland. The black eyes were polished jet buttons, set in a mask of bronze.

"You need not fear me, sir. I have no wish to do you harm. My silence will be much more profitable to us both."

The Murderer grasped it, then. Order began to sort itself from the chaos of his brain. There could be no mistaking Dr. Wang's meaning. It was blackmail, pure and simple.

"You were hunting for something, perhaps?" the Chinese murmured. "That is why you used the man-catcher on Herr Dorstmann?"

Still, The Murderer did not answer.

"For this, perhaps?" Wang said.

His hand came up, displaying a thing before him.

The Murderer stared. He could not seem to get the air to breathe. His heart was beating faster. Faster!

The thing in Wang's hand was the missing notebook!

CHAPTER VIII

The Axe of M'Kombo

MOMENTARILY, as Paul Updike sagged back unconscious, Tom stiffened. He felt hurriedly for the director's pulse, half afraid the man was dead.

But the beat was strong, almost nor-

mal. He told Johnson so.

The Egyptologist nodded, puffed placidly at his pipe, his face once again serene.

"Sure, Tom. I figured he'd just passed out. Just look at that place in his head. Flesh wound. Looks mighty nasty, but 'tain't much more than a bruise, when you get right down to it. Way I figure, this killer in the Chinese robe he was talkin' about was in a hurry. When he bumped into Updike, he was in too much of a rush to take time to finish him off. So he just slugged him, stowed him under the table, and kept on going."

It was Tom's turn to nod.

"It sounds logical," he admitted. "Only. . . ."

The other eyed him, puffed some more.

"Only who does that make guilty, you mean?"

"I guess that's it," Tom confessed. "I'd figured . . . well . . . when everybody else showed up and Updike didn't. . . ."

"Sure," Johnson agreed. "He didn't look like too bad a bet." He paused, stared briefly off into space. Then: "Only I reckon I got a better one."

It was strange, the way he made that atom-loaded statement. Quietly. Without particular emotion. In a friendly, easy manner, gentle as his Texas drawl.

Needles of excitement stabbed at Tom's nerves. He jerked his head up, stared at the Egyptologist.

"What do you mean?"

"Well—"

Paul Updike interrupted with a groan. His eyes opened, and he gazed up at them, eyes dull, face slack.

Johnson waved a greeting with his pipe.

"Take it easy, friend," he advised. "Reckon you had a pretty nasty crack.

You'll feel better if you don't move around too much. Take it from someone who knows."

Updike's head moved in the barest of nods.

"I don't think I could move if I had to," he whispered. And then, in a stronger voice: "I was on the stairs, coming down here, after the shot. Then a man in a mask and a Chinese mandarin robe came running out one of the doors. I think we must have seen each other at the same time. Only he was a lot faster than I was." He smiled wanly. "He jumped before I even realized he was coming. Hit me with something—I'm still not quite sure what it was. I remember pitching down the last few steps. Then—" His shoulders twitched in what might have been a shrug.

"I figured it was about that way," Johnson nodded. He walked to the door, peered up and down the corridor. "Reckon those others must be in holdin' a wake over Lorimer. Wait a minute."

He disappeared, only to return a few seconds later with Tonia Roberts at his heels.

"Brought you a nurse. Reckon you two can get along for a few minutes while McCray an' I do a little lookin' around?"

IF THE exchange of glances that passed between the two meant anything, Tom decided, they could get along for five weeks, let alone five minutes. He followed Johnson out into the hall.

"Well?"

The Egyptologist studied him a moment.

"Know anything about hashish, Tom?"

"Hashish?" Tom started.

"It's got a lot of names. Hashish is what they call it in Egypt. Marijuana

amounts to the same thing in this country."

Tom frowned.

"What are you getting at?"

"Interesting stuff, hashish." The other's manner was casual, but Tom noted that his eyes had narrowed. "It plays hob with a man's moral balance. Throws off his sense of right and wrong, you might say. Makes little things big and big things little. A stair-step looks a mile high to him, but he doesn't think a thing at all of murder."

Johnson's approach somehow sent a little tingle of excitement along Tom's spine, just as it had a few minutes previous when the Egyptologist had spoken of another suspect. He caught himself breathing a trifle faster.

"What are you getting at?" he asked again.

"Ever look close at Dr. Wang, Tom?"

"Dr. Wang!"

"Uh-huh." The other chuckled mirthlessly. "Ever look close at his eyes?"

"You mean—?"

"I don't mean anything, Tom. Not for sure. But the more I think about it, the more it seems to me like that lad's eyes belong to a hashish addict. There's something about 'em—the way they look. . . ."

Tom considered carefully. He tried to visualize the eyes of the Chinese. Tried to recall exactly the color and shape and expression. Yet the more he tried, the less he accomplished. He could remember nothing whatever unusual about Wang's face.

A strange reaction set in. He caught himself watching Johnson out of the corner of his own eye. A spark of suspicion began to smoulder in his own mind. It was queer, the way Johnson always turned up. Queer, too, the way he always was agreeable to suspecting

someone . . . anyone . . . but himself.

Guiltily, Tom stopped. It wasn't logical. Johnson had no motive whatsoever. He was just a kindly old gentleman with a bad-smelling pipe and a drawl as broad as Texas.

But his feeling still persisted. It rasped his nerves, made him edgy, uncertain.

"Well?" he demanded, and was a trifle ashamed when it came out blunt and harsh.

Johnson chewed at his pipe bit.

"I think it might be a good idea for us to take a look around for Dr. Wang," he said. "Either that, or take our chances on runnin' out to call the police or sheriff or somebody. An' I don't reckon anybody's too anxious to try that last, after what happened to Lorimer."

Tom nodded slowly.

"All right. I see your point. Where shall we start?"

Johnson chuckled.

"I'm afraid it isn't quite that simple, Tom. Wish it was, but it just doesn't work out that way." A pause. "My heart's just too weak. I couldn't take it." Another pause. "But if you were to take a quick look. . . ."

It was like pouring gasoline on an open fire. All Tom's doubts, his suspicions, his premonitions, blazed up anew.

"And what will you be doing?" he snapped.

"Me?" Again the Egyptologist chuckled, only this time it had a sinister ring. "Oh, I'll stay up in the board room an' look after the ladies, see that our murderer doesn't get a chance to cut their throats, too."

"The ladies?" Tom McCray went rigid. In that brief moment he cursed himself for a stupid, self-centered fool a hundred times. Panic leaped up in

him, the kind of panic that comes, not from personal peril, but from fear for the one one loves. "You mean—Clare—the others? Where are they? What are they doing?"

The other shrugged.

"Last I saw of 'em, they were up by the main entrance. That was when Lorimer got killed. Tonia turned up down here later, of course. I don't know about the others."

The panic in Tom McCray turned to a raging forest fire of fury. As from afar he heard his own voice shouting. Realized suddenly that his hands were clenched and knotted fists.

"You left them? All of you? Left them alone, up there, with that killer running loose?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He didn't expect one. All he knew was that somewhere in this vast, rambling marble tomb was Clare. Perhaps in danger. Perhaps, even—he shoved the very thought from his mind. He knew her peril. That was enough.

Now he had to act.

HE FOUND Miss North first, still lying there on the floor where Mictlantecutli, god of the dead, had struck her down.

He stopped short when he saw her. Fought and won a bitter battle with his writhing stomach on the spot. It wasn't easy, even though he'd seen war and death and horror oft before. It was different, somehow. More awful. Maybe because it was a girl who'd died. Or maybe because of Mictlantecutli himself, blood-spattered, gory, with his hideous green stone face still split in the death's-head grin.

He circled her carefully, after he'd got control, peering this way and that, trying to decide whether Clare had been with her, and if so, which way she'd gone.

Finally he gave it up. It was useless, and he knew it. There was only one method of going about it, and that was the hard way.

Grimly, he searched the floor. Every room. Every corridor. Every nook and niche and cranny.

Then, heart throbbing like a voodoo drum, he moved upstairs. Repeated the process, foot by foot, room by room.

Still nothing.

He came to the board room, at last. The door was locked.

This time he didn't hesitate.

There was a fire axe in a case down the hall. He jerked it down. Attacked the door.

The lock gave at the fourth blow.

He pushed his way in, stared down at the dead Dorstmann, still sprawled where he had fallen. The fat man's face was fear-contorted, hideous. His glazing eyes still bulged like awful marbles.

Sick pain gripped Tom. It was only with an effort he could swallow.

But not for the dead. No. The dead didn't matter. For them, there was nothing more.

Rather, it was another kind of pain. The pain that comes with realization of a horror that might have been prevented, mingled with panic for the thing he next might find.

In a frenzy, he stormed out of the room. Rushed on, from gallery to gallery, display to display.

He caught himself wondering, vaguely, who really was the killer. Wang, maybe, as Johnson said? Or Johnson himself? Or was there a stranger here, some unknown madman, prowling the halls athirst for blood?

And why? That was the real problem. Why? Why? Why? What rhyme or reason could there be, to a death that struck down old Holm and Miss North; Agatha Updike and Dorst-

mann; Lorimer, and Young, and Ed Quinn?

And Clare. What about Clare? What had happened to her? Where was she?

He tried not to think about her too much. It made his heart beat too fast. Blurred his eyes, shortened his breath.

In spite of it, she rose before him. Again he saw the shimmering auburn of her hair, caught its faint, remembered fragrance in his nostrils. The calm grey eyes. Her voice, with its merry, mocking lilt. Her body's slim perfection. The warmth of her lips, and her fingers, cool against his cheek.

It was a vision, leading him on. A beacon of life, a tower of purpose.

Desperately, he drove himself beyond his own endurance. Raced through the rooms like a madman, hunting some sign.

It was thus that he found Wang. Wang, the Chinese, the oriental. Wang, of the smooth, bland face, the blank black eyes, the straight, jet hair.

He was in the African Room, at the Congo exhibit. There was a tribal scene there, with huts and tools and weapons. Everything.

Everything. Even an execution block.

It had a history, that block. By Congo standards it was a thing of beauty. Workmen had toiled away their lives, carving its sides into intricate patterns. Brass-headed tacks gleamed like tiny golden suns against its ebon surface.

It had been the pride of a great chief, M'Kombo. The emblem of his rule, his own queer scepter. It had stood by his throne down through the years, ever ready to receive the strained, unwilling necks of those who crossed M'Kombo. M'Kombo's headsman was a skilled artist, the glittering, curved-edged axe he used now a major pride of arms and armor. As a matter of fact, rumor had it, the headsman's

work was so fine that when M'Kombo's sullen subjects at last revolted, they retained the axe-man in his office, so that he could demonstrate his skill upon M'Kombo.

And now, Wang was there.

Tom McCray stopped short when he saw him, sucked breath between clenched teeth. The world seemed to go black about him. He swayed, on the verge of oblivion.

Because Wang squatted by M'Kombo's far-famed chopping block, his neck in the smooth-worn groove, M'Kombo's beautiful, keen-edged axe lay beside him. The axe was wet with blood now—Wang's blood. His head had rolled away across the floor.

But his hand still clung to a shimmering tuft of Clare Kennedy's auburn hair.

CHAPTER IX

Thuggee

HOW far Clare Kennedy ran with that menacing figure at her heels she never knew. She lost all track of time and space and distance. She only knew that she was running . . . running . . . running, down endless miles of corridor, up countless flights of stairs. Her lungs were bursting, mist swimming before her eyes.

Somewhere, somehow, the killer fell behind. Clare couldn't even tell where or when it happened, only that he was not there when finally she fell exhausted, her aching legs unable to carry her further.

The horror of it almost overwhelmed her. She squeezed her eyes tight shut, but even so, the vision rose before her. Again she saw the idol toppling. Glimpsed Miss North's pinched face up-tilted, alive with dawning terror. Heard the chopped-off shriek, echoing and re-

echoing through the alcove.

She had to do something or go mad. Desperately, she pulled herself erect again, though her legs still trembled from the strain of flight. Slowly retraced her steps, as nearly as she could remember.

It was clear now, all too clear. The North girl had been right. She'd known the secret, who the murderer was. She'd died for that knowledge.

But she'd said, also, that it all was in her notebook.

Given the notebook, then, Clare thought, the murderer's identity would come with it.

She wondered later why she did it, and knew even as she wondered that there could not be an answer. It was one of those queer, psychological compulsions. A network of cross-currents and complexities. Forces, pulling her this way and that. Her emotions, making her do things her brain knew were wrong.

Yet do it she did. She had to do it. It was as if the spirits of those staring, unburied dead were behind her, spurring her on. Or perhaps it was a strange inversion of fear, drawing her, to new peril the way a magnet pulls iron filings.

Slowly, still, she descended the stairs. Moved from room to room, groping along on an unformed plan.

It was pure luck that brought her to the room where Wang and The Murderer stood face to face, taut and primed for hair-trigger action.

And it was luck again that let Clare catch their tight, grim voices before she reached them.

The door was an inch ajar. She peered through it, still not understanding. Involuntarily tensed as she saw them.

It was little enough she saw. Wang, of course, did not matter. The Mur-

derer was the man who held her startled gaze, made her breath come faster.

He was, she thought, the strangest figure she had ever seen. His body was draped with the mandarin robe, a weird, myriad-colored rainbow, with a mesh of chain mail peeping through its rents and tears. On his head set the Renaldi casque. The struggle to tear it off Young's head had left it a trifle warped, in a way that somehow gave it a bizarrely sinister aspect. A belt girded the killer's midriff, supporting a dagger on the left side.

But the first flush of triumph passed in an instant. The helmet's visor was closed. Clare could not see the slayer's face. Not even his voice was any help; the casque so distorted it as to make it unrecognizable.

Then, with a new, sharp thrill, she saw the notebook in Wang's hand.

Instinctively, she recognized it. It was the key to murder.

ALTHOUGH she remembered being able to see the edge of the light switch just inside the door, there was no conscious process of making up her mind. Somehow, there was just the notebook, and then the light switch. Subconsciously, she realized, she must have added the two together.

The result was madness.

She swayed against the door. Then, swiftly, as it began to swing open, slipped her hand inside and threw the switch.

The room plunged into darkness—stygian, black.

In an instant she was inside, across the intervening distance, snatching the notebook from Wang's hand.

The very daring of it, the sheer audacity, almost got her out unscathed. But then a hand slashed out of the darkness. Steel fingers clutched at her throat.

Panic screamed through her. She struck out blindly. Tore at the steel fingers.

By accident, she got the thumb. A thing Tom once had told her leaped to her brain.

She gripped the thumb. Pulled it straight back with all her strength.

A muffled Chinese snarl came to her ears. The hand on her windpipe jerked away, carrying half-a-dozen hairs with it.

Madly, she fled.

SHE stopped, at last, in Paul Updike's office. Began hastily thumbing through the battered notebook.

A syrupy voice, dripping venom, stopped her short.

"Found something hot, honey?"

Clare spun about in wordless panic.

Tonia Roberts stood in the doorway, one hand casually accentuating a sleek hip's curve, a cigarette in the other.

The breath went out of Clare in a gasp.

"Tonia! You frightened me."

"Did I?" Tonia moved forward as if on ball-bearings, a sleek, smiling black panther. "Is that the notebook?"

With a start, Clare realized she was gripping it to her breast. She forced herself to relax and smile.

"That depends on what notebook you mean, Tonia. Are you looking—"

"You know what I mean." There was a sudden taut, harsh note in the other's voice. Her green eyes gleamed like jade, cold and dark and hard. "Is that the notebook that stupid little North frump had in her bag?"

Clare felt a tide of irritation rising within her. Irritation, and something more. She didn't know whether it could be called suspicion or not, but the two certainly were closely akin.

"Do you think that's the way to ask, if you really want to know?" she

queried coolly.

Tonia came close, her green eyes narrowed.

"I want that notebook!" she snapped.

Clare drew her lips tight together.

"That's no sign you're going to get it!"

"Isn't it?" Tonia's nostrils flared.

"No, it isn't! And if you have any notions of trying to take it—"

A veil seemed to fall over the brunette's eyes. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she smiled.

"I guess I didn't go about it very well, at that, did I?" she asked wryly. She let one hip rest on Updike's polished desk. Toyed, still smiling, with a heavy metal bookend. "Skip it, Clare. My nerves are on edge. I keep hanging between wanting to run out of here like the devil himself was after me, and being afraid to move."

Clare watched her warily, nodded.

"Yes, I know."

"If only it would end—" There was a catch in Tonia's voice. "I can't go on this way much longer. I can't stand it—"

And then, without notice, without warning, Tonia's hand came up, gripping the bookend.

Desperately, Clare tried to dodge, get away from the blow.

Instead, she tripped over her own feet. A stab of pain, the shock of impact, shot through her. All at once she knew she was falling.

Her brain exploded into new constellations of stars.

SHE couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds, really. Tonia was just picking up the notebook when she opened her eyes.

"Thanks, honey." There was a smirk on the brunette's face. "I have a notion this notebook is the only proof left of why all this has happened. It

ought to make interesting reading."

Clare struggled to a sitting position in spite of her spinning head, the roaring in her ears.

"Give it back! It's evidence—" Even as she said it, she knew her voice was cracking.

Tonia laughed.

"Hardly." And then: "I mean, I'd hardly be likely to give it back. Not when it means as much to me as it does."

Clare could only stare.

"I'm expecting this notebook to support me in luxury for the rest of my life," the other went on. "Just think! How much should a murderer pay to keep his secret?"

"You mean—after all this . . . you'd try to blackmail the man who did these things?" Clare could hardly get out the words. Her whole being was acrawl with horror.

"Why not?"

"Why not!" Clare exploded. "Honestly, Tonia, you can't be that big a fool. Even with everything else aside—the killing, the viciousness, the whole awful business—, can't you see what will happen? You can't blackmail a murderer. He's got nothing left to lose. He'll kill you, too—"

"Oh, I don't think so." Tonia's slim fingers played a silent tattoo on the notebook's cover. "I'll manage it."

Before Clare could speak again, a voice from the doorway interrupted. A different voice, this time, though. A queer, hollow, resounding voice, echoing out of a metal helmet.

"I doubt that, Tonia!"

As one, the two girls whirled.

The slayer, in mandarin robe and visored casque, watched from the doorway.

SILENCE. Tense, taut silence, while the seconds ticked by.

Then Tonia broke.

"No! No! I didn't mean it—" Hysteria echoed in her tone.

"I doubt that, Tonia," the killer said again. He took one short step forward. Closed the door behind him. Turned the key in the lock. Took it out, and put it in his pocket.

"No!" whispered Tonia. Already she was shrinking away, backing toward the farthest corner.

"This room has only one door," the masked man said. "That door is locked. It won't be opened again until I am ready to leave here . . . alone."

The way he said it was final as the knell of doom.

Clare could only stare at him, held, fascinated, as a rabbit is held by a swaying cobra. Her body was numb, her mouth gone dry.

The man in the casque had a rapier in his belt now, hanging beside the dagger. The mandarin robe was frayed and torn. Its right skirt was wet to the knee with some dark stain, so saturated that it dripped a steady, continuous stream onto the carpet.

"Are you ready, Tonia?" the man said.

The dark girl cowered in her corner, her hands drawn up across her breast. Her eyes were wild and wide, her mouth open, giving forth a strange, animal sound—half sob, half gasp.

And Clare could only watch, horror-straight, fascinated, paralyzed. She caught herself wondering which of the weapons the man would use, the rapier or the dagger.

Slowly, he came forward, fumbling beneath his robe. His eyes, through the visor, were like hot coals—gleaming, bestial. Caged tiger's eyes, Clare thought.

His hands came out into the open again, bearing a slim silk cord. He wound it about his palms, gripped it.

tight.

"I'm sorry, Tonia. But it won't hurt you much. This cord"—he flexed it—"is fast, and sure. A Thug's cord, from the north of India." He laughed aloud. "The Thugs know how to kill, Tonia."

"No, no . . .!" the dark girl moaned. "Not that—I!"

"I'm coming, Tonia."

The sword stretched taut, he slithered forward. Closer . . . closer . . . closer . . .

THEN, suddenly, a sort of madness seemed to grip Tonia Roberts. Her mouth opened. Her lips drew back to bare her teeth. Her fear-distended eyes rolled like a lunatic's.

"No!" she screamed. "No!" She hurled herself on the man, clutched at the dagger in his belt. "I'll kill you!"

She snatched the dagger out. Stabbed at the masked man's chest again and again.

As suddenly as it had come, the madness seemed to leave her. She stopped, a queer, surprised look on her face. Stared down at her hand.

Tiny drops of blood were oozing from the flesh against the dagger's guard.

"I . . . I . . ." She seemed to be trying to speak, but the words would not come. Her eyes glazed.

Slowly, her face still wearing that strange, unbelieving look, she slid to the floor.

Clare tried to swallow. She could not. It seemed to her as if she could not even breathe.

The masked man laughed within his helmet.

"She killed herself!" he said. "Did you see her? She stabbed me, but my coat of mail turned the blade. And every time she stabbed, the poisoned needles in the guard drove down into her hand." Again he laughed. "I

didn't kill her! She killed herself!"

Clare felt her body shrivel under that mad, keening babble.

The man reached down for Miss North's notebook. Carefully, painstakingly, he shredded it, page by page, into the metal wastebasket by the desk. Then, calmly, he struck a match, tossed it into the mass of scraps. They flared. He stirred them, crushed the ashes.

At last he turned to face Clare Kennedy. Again he looped the cord around his hands.

"Don't worry, my dear." He sounded like a ghou's tender lover. "You'll hardly know. . . ."

Slowly, he shuffled toward her. The silken cord drew taut and ready.

No paralysis could stand that awful instant. Clare Kennedy screamed. . . .

CHAPTER X

The Doge's Dagger

THE murderer breathed the air of triumph deep. It was victory—total; complete! How many had he killed? Was it eight, or nine?

And what did it matter, anyhow? He had killed enough! The deaths he'd aimed at were accomplished, skillfully veiled in a camouflage of innocent blood. Let the police try to untangle those slayings! Just let them try! The last clue to his motive was gone, burned to a cinder, the ashes crumpled and broken. Not an iota of evidence remained.

He felt justified in congratulating himself on that part. The shock, when Wang had come upon him, would have been enough to unnerve a lesser man. But he—he had faced it, fought it through.

It had been bad, that moment with Wang. He would never forget the instant when first he saw the notebook in

the orientalist's hand. It had rocked him, set him back on his heels. The knot in his stomach had exploded into a thousand icy fingers, striking him to stone. He'd seen the world through a blur of crashing castles in the air, and plans gone wrong.

Even now, in his heart of hearts, The Murderer had to admit it might have ended that way, had it not been for the Kennedy girl. She'd snapped the light, thrown Wang off guard. Except for that, The Murderer might never have lived to leave the room. Because Wang was no fool. He hadn't come empty-handed to the parley. A heavy Smith & Wesson Magnum had been tucked under his belt, and the Magnum was a gun that would shoot through chain mail like tissue paper.

But the girl had disconcerted him. In his panic, he'd left The Murderer free. The Murderer chuckled silently. It had been Wang's last mistake. One short, sharp blow. Then, a hasty trip to the Congo village. Brief rise and fall of a headsman's axe.

And Wang's head, rolling on the floor.

The Murderer liked that picture. It appealed to his sense of humor, drove back all traces of the panic he once had felt. It was power, that picture. The power that comes with control of life and death.

He'd left the Chinese on the block. It had been messy enough, even so. The corpse had twisted, the headless stump of neck spurting blood. It had soaked the whole right skirt of the mandarin robe.

So he'd left him there. Besides, there had been another reason: Wang still had gripped half-a-dozen auburn hairs from Clare Kennedy's head. That would add nicely to the puzzle confronting the police.

Tonia gave the only twinge of conscience on his record. He had been

sorry to have to dispose of Tonia. She was such a sultry creature—all woman, all passion; and that was to his taste. But when, standing in the doorway, he'd heard her speak of blackmail, he knew she'd have to go. Even had she not developed that sudden, larcenous streak, it would have been best to have her out of the way. After all, there would always be other women. But his safety—no, that was something too precious to risk.

What was it Oscar Wilde had said—"For each man kills the thing he loves. . . .?"

Yes, that was it. So be it. He had killed, and he had triumphed. Soon, it would be over. Then he could discard this grotesque mummery, again assume his rightful place.

He wondered whether it would be most effective merely to rejoin the survivors, or to go forth alone in the role of intrepid hero to call the police.

No matter. Either way would do. And either way, he could be proud of. Old Nicolo Renaldi would have hailed him as blood brother after an exploit such as this.

There remained only the girl to be disposed of.

The Murderer pulled his Thug's cord taut between his hands, advanced upon her.

She was a pretty thing—beautiful, almost. It was too bad she had to die. The coppery auburn of her hair framed her oval face like a mediaeval artist's halo. Even terror could not rob her lips of their appeal, or her eyes of their cool grey depths. The firm, uptilted lines of her breasts, rising and falling too fast through panic, made The Murderer himself breathe more quickly. Such a pity. . . .

He lunged at her throat.

She screamed—s h a r p; piercing. Scrambled away from him, her pa-

ralysis all at once broken.

With an oath, he started to follow. Then stopped short, whirled, as a crash of sound reverberated in his ears.

Involuntarily, then, he jerked with shock. Suddenly, incredibly, his castles were crumbling again, the cold, tight knot come back to life.

The door The Murderer had locked was open. Tom McCray stood framed against it, a battle-axe in his hands.

"YOU'RE done, Updike!" McCray said. "You might as well take off that pot on your head. I know the whole thing now."

For an instant The Murderer cringed in spite of himself, afire with sudden panic. Then he rallied, shook off the frenzy. It was his nerves, he told himself. That was all. They were cracking up. He'd destroyed the evidence. All he had to do now was kill this fool, along with the girl, and he'd be safe. There was nothing to be afraid of.

His lip curled.

"You poor, blind ass!" he sneered.

"Not so blind as you, Updike!" said McCray. The Murderer noticed that the easy-going lines, the broad good nature, of the other's face had turned to stone. There was a hardness about the man, a ruthlessness, that made The Murderer bite down hard. It was as if there were two McCrays—and this one spelled menace, incarnate.

"In the end, you took too much for granted, Updike," McCray went on. "You thought Wang would be such a fool as to show his whole hand. It never occurred to you that he'd tear the sheets that counted out of the North girl's loose-leaf stenographer's notebook before he showed it to you. He knew you couldn't read shorthand, so he didn't have to worry about your checking up."

A fit of trembling seized The Mur-

derer. It frightened him. It seemed completely beyond control. No matter how he tried, he could not stop it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

"I'm talking about the new will Lorrimer, the lawyer, was drawing up for your wife, Agatha Updike," McCray said harshly. "He must have told you about it. That's the only thing that could have started you on this murder-go-round. The will was still in draft, just as he'd dictated it to his secretary. You had to act in a hurry, before it could be approved and signed."

The sweat kept coming on the palms of The Murderer's hands. No matter how often he scrubbed it off against the Chinese robe, it kept coming.

"That will went right to the point," McCray pressed grimly on. "Your wife cut you off from her money without a cent, and she stated her reasons. She'd found out about your affair with Tonia Roberts. As far as she was concerned, that settled it. From the general tone, I imagine she was suing for divorce, too. And since it was her money got you your job as director of this museum, probably she had the power to make the board fire you, too. Maybe she even planned to bring it up at tonight's meeting."

The Murderer's brain was a throbbing ball of fire. His face felt hot, his mouth dust-dry.

"You'll never live to prove it!" he said. "I'll kill you and the girl both, just like I did the others. I'll shut your mouths—"

McCray laughed in his face.

"A fat lot of good that'll do you, Updike. I wasn't taking any chances. I sent Johnson to get the police before I came up here. And for safety's sake, I sent those pages Wang tore out of Miss North's notebook along with him. The cop'll know how to handle

this after they read them."

A strange, dark fury welled in The Murderer's heart. Red haze swam before his eyes. His hands itched for the feel of McCray's thick throat. He caught himself licking his lips at the thought of sinking his fingers into the living flesh, rendering it, tearing it apart, crushing the windpipe.

"I'll hand it to you on one thing, though, Updike," McCray said. "You kept me guessing till the last. You squirmed in and out of things like an eel. When you looked guilty, you looked so damned completely guilty that I couldn't believe you were the one. I figured it must be Johnson, for sure, or Wang. Only all the time it was you. Even down there on the ground floor, when we found you with your head staved in. Even then, you managed to convince us someone else was the killer, that you were just one more victim, when actually Young almost got you when he came bursting in through that door after you'd killed Lorimer."

"You fool!" The Murderer said. He could hold it back no longer.

McCray stopped. Stared.

"Do you think I intend to wait here till your stupid police come?" The Murderer lashed. There was no controlling the force of his fury now. "Do you think I'll let you live, for that matter? No! I'm going, do you hear? And I'll leave you dead behind me!"

The red haze swirled about him. The rapier seemed to leap to his hand.

Madly, he charged.

THERE could be but one outcome to the struggle that followed. The Murderer knew it. He had been a fencer of sorts, years ago. It put the odds all in his favor. He could play a cat-and-mouse game, driving McCray before him. The clumsy battle-axe the

other bore was not even good for parrying. The rapier slashed rings around it. The point ripped McCray's shirt. The blade drew blood along his ribs.

The sight of the scarlet ripple was a needle in The Murderers' arm. He lunged anew, parried, and lunged again. He could see the desperation in McCray's face now, the hard-fought battle with panic and fear in flight. Sweat glistened in an oily sheen. Nostrils flared. The axe came back more slowly.

The Murderer laughed aloud, pushed up his visor so that he could get more air. It was unimportant now, that visor. These two knew already who he was, and they would die for that knowledge. Concealment no longer mattered.

Again, McCray leaped backward. With a visible effort, he avoided Tonia's stiffening corpse, stumbled on against the wall.

The move was sudden, unexpected. For the fraction of a second The Murderer was left behind, off balance, no quite able to follow.

McCray threw the axe.

Again, The Murderer laughed. He dropped to one knee, let the clumsy weapon whirl by overhead. Then, with a rush, he pressed in.

Victory sang in his blood as he glimpsed the wild uncertainty in McCray's eyes. The man bent double, swooping, scooping. Then he was up again, a gleaming dagger in his hand.

The very surprise of it rocked The Murderer back. But it was a pleasant surprise. A new thrill tingled up and down his spine.

The fool had the dagger, the Renaldi dagger, that deadly, poisoned dagger that had lain in Tonia's hand!

It was too good, too appropriate, almost more than The Murderer could bear. Already he could visualize those tiny twin punctures that would come

in McCray's hand at the first stab. He remembered the expression on Tonia's face. The way she slid to the floor, still uncomprehending.

CLARE Kennedy's scream echoed like an exclamation point. It brought a sudden, joyous surge of heat to The Murderer's heart. She'd seen Tonia die. She knew what was in store for McCray. Yet there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing.

The Murderer sprang to the attack.

Then, incredibly, McCray was straightening, with no effort at a guard. He flipped the *doge's* dagger into the air, caught it by its point.

The blade was a flash of light as he hurled it straight at The Murderer's open visor.

The Murderer acted by reflex. There was no time for anything else. This was no clumsy battle-axe, no feeble thrust. This was a speeding, deadly thing, fast as a bullet, straight as an arrow, sharp as a razor.

Instinctively, The Murderer threw up his hand.

The dagger struck it square in the palm. Pierced it. Ripped through the back.

Stupidly, The Murderer stared at it. Of a sudden, the rapier in his other hand was forgotten. McCray and the girl were forgotten, too. Everything, forgotten. Lost in the maelstrom of tumult that was The Murderer's brain.

Things began to come clear, then. He remembered the beaverboard target McCray kept in The Dungeon. The Mexican throwing knives. The endless, eternal practice.

And the dagger. Old Nicolo Renaldi's dagger, with its deep-veined, poison-laden blade. The same keen blade that now stuck through his hand.

With a start, he realized that he was no longer standing. That he had slid

to the floor, just as Tonia had done, struck down by that subtle sickness from which there is no return.

Afar off, he heard McCray's voice, coming across a thousand foggy miles:

"It's a trick dagger, Angel. From our Renaissance collection. It used to belong to an old boy named Nicolo Renaldi, who made the Borgias look pale. The blade's poisoned, and there are poisoned needles in the guard, too. Old Nicolo designed it so that it kills whoever you stab, but then the guy that does the stabbing dies, too. The only safe way to use it—if you can call it a safe way—is to throw it, like I did. I got the idea from old Nicolo. He was killed the same way I got Updike. I found that out when I was studying up on the dagger."

The light seemed to be fading. The Murderer could hardly see across the room. But he could feel, still. At least, he could feel the poison.

The futility of it all came to him, then. Before his eyes, the airy castles crumbled into dust. His victims' specters rose to haunt him, crying out aloud for vengeance. And over it all there rang a hellish sound of laughter, the dim vision of a leering, sneering face.

Old Nicolo's laughter. Old Nicolo's face.

With one last desperate effort, The Murderer forced his eyes to see.

McCray and the Kennedy girl were standing there, locked in each others' arms.

The laughter was growing louder now, the blackness closing in.

The Murderer sagged back.

"Nicolo, Nicolo. . ." He was not even sure he spoke the words. Perhaps they were only the last faint throbs of his dying brain. "Nicolo, you have betrayed me!"

Oblivion.



I lowered the bottle to stare at her. Even with the veil, she was worth staring at



So Much Can Go Wrong

by Robert Moore Williams

**It wasn't until they found this
pile of bones that Digger got angry**

CHAPTER I

"**H**I, ANGEL," Digger said, jerking open the door of his reception room. He was in a good humor. He felt like jerking open a door and sticking his head into a room

and startling somebody.

The girl at the typewriter jumped. "Darn you, Jake."

He smiled appreciatively at her.

"That's the little boy in you," she

accused. "The little boy that never grew up."

Digger's eyes went thoughtfully down to her knees, visible under the typewriter. With or without nylon, they were very nice knees. Digger grinned. "Oh, yes he did grow up," he said.

Angel blushed. She hastily covered the knees with her skirt. There was annoyance on her face. It went away. Her face became grave.

"Is the reward still open in the Weems case?" she said.

Digger was grinning when she spoke. The grin went away. His face was left lean and hard and cold. He looked at the girl in silence for a second. Then he walked past her. He went into his private office and slammed the door. When she came into the room he was sitting at his desk moodily looking out the window.

"Jake," she said tremulously.

"I was just making a little joke," he said, still looking out the window. "I was just in a good humor nad was teasing a little bit. I know the books say teasing is a form of hostility but I don't for one minute believe it. And you had to get out the big needle. The great big needle with the dull point."

"But Jake—"

His voice was toneless. "Maybe I'm too sensitive about the Wems case, Angel. I don't know. But I worked on it—"

"I remember."

"I didn't solve it," he went on. "That isn't important. A lot of them don't get solved. The important thing is that I saw that kid's body there in the weeds. I didn't find it but I was there thirty minutes after the flash came in. The horse weeds were as high as my head. It was stinking hot, an August afternoon with the sun coming right straight down. The state patrol was

already there. The farm boy who had found the body was there. We were all there in the horse weeds and the heat. There were bones on the ground, little bones, the bones of a two-year old youngster. The body must have been there six months. The kid was kidnapped in March and this was August. The dogs had found the body long before the farm boy stumbled on it. The dogs and the summer heat. Bones was all that was left. And torn bits of cloth that had once been blue pajamas. Buttons that had once been on a bathrobe. A little gold ring with the words, '*To Gee Gee from Daddy*.' They were all there in the horse weeds, all that was left of Gee Gee Weems."

Horror showed on the girl's face. Horror and sympathy.

DIGGER turned slowly in his swivel chair. He opened the lower drawer of the desk. There was a pint bottle of rye in the drawer, and a glass. He ignored the glass. The whiskey went gurgle, gurgle, gurgle down his throat, like water. He scarcely felt the sting and the bite of the stuff. He put the bottle back into the drawer.

"And so, Angel, we can play little games with each other. We can use the little needles. But, Angel, please don't mention the Weems case to me because to me that's the big needle, the very biggest needle there is. Every time I hear the word I can smell horse weeds and heat and see little fragments of cloth—all that remained of blue wool pajamas after six months."

"John! I wasn't—"

"It brings out the murder in me," he said, his voice still toneless. "The woman who took that kid out the window and down the ladder—the thread of cloth on the nail in the ladder had certainly been torn from a woman's slacks and the footprints in the garden

beside the house had been made by a woman's shoes—the woman who killed that youngster and threw the body in that river field where the horse weeds would grow, I could kill that female kidnapper, Angel; I could kill her with my bare hands."

There was sympathy on her face. She came quickly around the desk.

"I'm sorry, John."

He shook his head. "So you see why you mustn't needle me about the Weems case, Angel. Any other needle, yes. But not that one. I can't take it. It hurts too much."

She took the lapels of his coat in both hands. She pulled his face up. "I wouldn't needle you about that, John. You thought I was just getting even with you because you jerked open the door and startled me. I wasn't. I wouldn't do that. No, John, it wasn't that. Somebody called the office a while ago, John, *somebody who wanted to know if the reward was still open for the Weems baby kidnapper.*"

He suddenly sat up very straight in the chair. "What?"

"This woman called."

"A woman?"

"Yes. She said her name was Tessie Wright and that she was from out of town. She said she understood you had worked on the Weems baby case—"

"How did she know that?"

"She wouldn't say."

"Did you ask her?"

"I certainly did. She wouldn't tell me. Since you had worked on the case, she thought you would know if the reward was still open."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I didn't know. After all, the case is over two years old. Several rewards were offered at the time and I didn't know whether or not all of them have been withdrawn."

"Weems offered five grand for the return of the youngster unharmed" Digger said. "That one went out the window. The Times offered five more for the same purpose. That one went out the window too. I don't know whether or not Weems ever offered anything for the capture of the kidnapper but the Times had five grand on her head. That I know. The Times may have withdrawn it. To hell with the reward anyhow. What did this Wright woman have to say?"

"She said she wanted to see you."

Digger nodded. "Can do. Did you tell her to come up?"

"I did but she wouldn't do it. She said for you to come and see her. She's staying at the Globe Hotel, on Sixth Street."

"The Globe, huh?" Digger grunted. "I can say this for her, she's not very choosy about her hotels. What else did she have to say?"

ANGEL took a package of cigarettes from Digger's coat pocket, tapped one on her fingernail. He lit it for her. She walked around the desk and sat down in the comfortable chair that was reserved for clients. Digger watched her with the alert expression of a cat watching a mouse hole. She looked annoyed.

"I told it a little backwards," she said. "You upset me and I told it backwards."

"All right, tell it frontwards."

"She called twice," Angel said. "At least I think it was the same woman who called the first time."

"*Think?*" Digger questioned. "Don't you know?"

"I'm not sure. I think so."

He sighed. "There were two telephone calls. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"You think this Tessie Wright made

both of them?"

"I'm almost certain of it."

"You didn't, by any chance, ask her her name the first time?"

"Of course. She wouldn't tell me. She just wanted to know if there was a reward for the return of the Weems baby when she called the first time."

"What?"

Angel nodded firmly. "I know, I know. I'm telling you what happened."

Digger leaned back in his chair. He looked speculatively down toward the lower drawer of his desk, decided against it. "Go on," he said. "Tell me what happened. On the first call."

"That's all. She asked about the reward on the Weems case. Since—" Her face was wan and thoughtful as she looked at him. "—since I knew about—about—since I knew about it, I told her I didn't think there was any reward because the Weems baby was dead. She held on to the phone a minute as though she was thinking. I asked her who she was and why she had called. She didn't answer. The line was alive and she was listening but she didn't answer. Then she hung up."

Digger got up from his desk. He walked across the room and back again, following the worn path in the rug. He kept on walking. "Shes' a nut," he said suddenly. "Two doctors identified those bones as belonging to a two-year old girl. Weems identified the ring. The jeweler who sold it to him identified it. The engraver identified it. Gee Gee was wearing blue woolen pajamas the night she was kidnapped. Mrs. Weems identified the strips of torn, mouldy cloth. She dug up another pair of pajamas bought at the same time. The lab men ran comparisons. There was the same percentage of wool in the rags and in the good pajamas, the same weave, the same dye. She also identified the pieces of cloth from the little

bathrobe, she identified the ring—"

Abruptly he sat down. "Every time I think about it I smell horse weeds." His hand went toward the bottom drawer. It seemed to have a will of its own. It opened the drawer and got out the bottle. He watched it carry the bottle to his mouth.

"I hate the smell of horse weeds," he said, putting the bottle back in the drawer. "Go on," he said. "You had two telephone calls, both from women. You think they were both from the same woman but you're not sure. Tell me the rest of it."

"About thirty minutes later I got the second call," Angel Marks said.

"If it was the same woman, she took time out to do some thinking and decided to call back," Digger said.

Angel nodded. "That's what I decided. This time she wanted to talk to you. I told her I was your private secretary and any message for you she could leave with me. She wanted to know if there was a reward for the Weems kidnapper. When I told her I didn't know, she gave me her name and address and said she wanted you to come see her."

DIGGER rose from his desk. He picked up his hat, placed it firmly on his head. "The odds are I'm chasing a nut," he said. "This world is full of squirrel food. Anything else?"

"I asked her if she was the person who had called before," Angel said.

"What did she say?"

"She didn't. She talked about something else."

Digger nodded. "She would," he said gloomily. "These females are always trying to be cagey. All except you, Angel." He ruffled her hair. It was soft and silky to the touch. He found an ear, tweaked it gently. "I don't know what your daddy had in mind

when he named you Angel, but he had the right word."

"More," she said, lifting her head against his hand. "More scratch."

"No more for now," he answered. "There's work to be done." He started toward the door.

She looked resigned. She had seen him go like that so many times that she had learned how to accept his going.

"One other thing," she called.

"What's that?"

"She sounded scared."

"Probably a paranoid," he mused, his hand on the doorknob. "Paranoids are always scared."

"But all scared people aren't paranoid," Angel said.

He grinned at her, closed the door softly, went down the hallway and down the single flight of steps to the street. His car was in the parking lot on Lindell. He went to get it. The traffic in the street said the time was five thirty, a fact confirmed by his watch and his stomach. He decided he would have a manhattan and dinner before he went to call on Tessie Wright.

At the downtown bar where he stopped, the one manhattan turned out to have three little brothers.

Even then he could still smell horse weeds.

CHAPTER II

THE round white globe hanging from the goose neck fixture said GLOBE HOTEL in black letters. The light inside the fixture was so dim you had to look twice to make certain it was burning. Digger looked twice. He decided it was burning all right but he couldn't see what difference that made. The sign itself was enough to run anybody away who had as much as two bucks in his pocket. He went in.

The lights in the cramped little lobby

were dim too. The clerk sitting in the hole in the wall that served as the hotel desk was not very bright either. He peeped up from behind his frayed collar and looked apprehensively at Digger.

"Did you wish a room, sir?"

"No, thank you. I'm calling on a guest, a Miss Tessie Wright. Is she registered here?"

The clerk thought about that. He could answer the question. The problem in his mind was whether or not he wanted to answer it.

"Miss Tessie Wright," Digger repeated. "Is she here?"

The clerk didn't answer. He looked at his caller, trying to estimate what this big man wanted and why. Digger grinned. He took a roll of bills out of his pocket. The clerk's eyes went instantly from his face to the money. He carefully peeled off a single, laid it on the counter.

"Miss Tessie Wright," he stated.

A thin hand like a clutching claw came swiftly up from under the counter. The hand moved very fast. It came up and went back. The bill was gone.

Digger thought of a lizard catching a fly. The tongue of the lizard had that same swift darting motion, the same quick withdrawal out of sight.

"Right up the stairs, sir," the clerk said. "Room two fourteen. It's the end room on your left, at the back of the hall."

He nodded toward the stair steps with the rubber treads and the yellow paint on the risers and on the banisters.

"Huh?" Digger said. "I mean—aren't you going to call up and see if she wants to receive me?" He was a little surprised.

"We don't have phones in the rooms, sir," the clerk answered. "Room two fourteen at the end of the hall."

"Oh," Digger said.

The clerk grinned. He was at least sixty years old and the grin was strictly out of place. But he could still think about it, apparently.

"Go right on up," he said.

Digger shook his head. "It's not what you think," he said. He went up the stairs.

The hall was dim and silent. The carpet on the floor was worn thin. It smelled of dust and mold. A dim red bulb marking the fire escape burned at the end of the hall. Two white bulbs burned on the right side. One was marked Ladies, the other Gents. There was a back stairs. Room two fourteen was right across from it.

The transom was open. A light was burning in the room. Digger knocked lightly.

He expected to hear a scurry of footsteps and a startled, morals-squad-wary voice say, "Who is it?"

He didn't hear anything. There was silence in the room. For all the response he got he might as well not have knocked.

He rapped again, louder, sharper.

"Miss Wright? Open up. This is John Digger. You wanted to see me."

Silence from the room.

He rattled the door knob. It turned in his fingers and the door opened.

Miss Wright was in. He could see she was in. He could also see she would never see him.

She was lying on her stomach on the brass bedstead. Her face was twisted almost completely around. Her eyes, popped almost out of her head, stared blankly at the single bulb dangling from the cord attached to the ceiling.

DIGGER stepped quickly into the room. Two gouging scratches, like grooves from scraping finger nails, crossed her right cheek. The scratches traced slender red trails down to her

throat. Purple splotches were visible there.

Fingers, sliding down across her cheek, had grasped her throat, leaving the purple splotches on the delicate flesh.

Digger picked up her wrist, feeling for the pulse. There was no pulse. He had known there would be no pulse and feeling for it had been an unconscious reflex movement. The unnatural position of her head told him her neck was broken. A woman with a broken neck had no pulse. So there was nothing he could do to help her. He was too late to help her. An hour too late. Perhaps two hours. About the time he was working on his second manhattan, tryin gto get the smell of horse weeds out of his soul, Miss Tessie Wright had died.

He stood for a second looking at her. She was about thirty, he guessed, with black hair, a fair skin, and eyes that were a washed-out shade of blue. She was wearing a cheap blue dressing gown that she had pulled on over a slip to admit the caller. Her shoes had been kicked off during the terrible seconds she had been pinned to the bed, her murderer on top of her like some gigantic leech, holding her down with the weight of his body, his gouging fingers clamped on her throat.

Her purse, with its contents hastily spilled out, was lying on top of the dresser. The door to the closet was open and the two dresses hanging there had been jerked from their hangers. A cheap imitation leather suitcase was lying on the floor. Its contents, a bra, a slip, an extra pair of stockings, a pair of shoes, three pairs of rayon panties, a panty girdle, were lying around it.

The lining of the suitcase had been ripped open.

A fact detective magazine was lying on the table beside the stiff-backed

rocking chair. A Gideon bible was lying on top of it. Neither had been disturbed in the killer's hasty search of the room.

Digger could see the signs of that search. He wondered what the killer was looking for. That was something that would have to come later, the object of that search. Right now there were two other things that had to be done.

CAREFULLY closing the door behind him, Digger walked down the hall, down the stairs with the worn rubber mats on the treads. The hotel was quiet. He saw no one, heard no one. The stairs creaked as he went down. The clerk in the cubbyhole that served as a desk heard him coming and popped his head out of the hole to leer knowingly to him. Digger walked up to the desk.

"As man to man, tell me the truth," he said. "Haven't you got a little bottle hidden somewhere handy?"

The clerk's mouth dropped open. He was expecting any question except this question. He was so surprised he forgot to conceal his feelings.

"Well—" he began.

"Get it out," Digger said. "Get it out."

The clerk was so dumbfounded that he got the bottle out before he thought. It was a half-pint with only a little gone. A blend. "Twelve and one-half per cent straight whiskey, eighty-seven and one-half per cent cane neutral spirits."

The bottle was half-gone when Digger took it from his lips. Little trickles of whiskey ran from the corners of his lips. He looked at the bottle and made a wry face.

"I hate bad whiskey," he said.

The clerk looked despairingly at the quantity of whiskey remaining in the

bottle.

"I didn't ask you to drink it," he said.

"No hard feelings, pal," Digger answered. "Good or bad, I needed a drink. And there are some things I hate worse than bad whiskey." He looked up the stairs.

"She wasn't friendly?" the clerk asked.

"She didn't say yes and she didn't say no," Digger answered. "What time did she come in today?"

"I don't know," the clerk said. "About five, I think. Maybe five thirty. Did she break a date with you?"

"Sort of. When did she check in here?"

"Couple of days ago."

"Um. Anybody been up to see her since she came in this afternoon?"

"No. Not a soul. At least nobody came to the desk to ask about her until you came in. Of course, there's been people going in and out of the hotel all the time and somebody who knew her number might have gone up without stopping at the desk. Why are you asking all these questions?"

"Trying to get a line on her," Digger said. "I kind of got the impression she was a hot little piece and I was wondering if she was doing any stepping. You know what I mean: was anybody else getting to it."

The clerk leered. This was a subject that interested him.

"I don't know how hot she is but she's stacked up all right. One of the boys who lives in the hotel is kind of giving her a play but I don't know whether or not he's making progress. She a friend of yours?"

"Sort of."

The clerk looked thoughtfully at Digger. He also looked at the bottle which Digger was still holding. Digger set it back on the desk. It vanished.

instantly, sliding out of sight with the speed with which the clerk had collected the half dollar.

"Where's she from?" Digger asked.

"Some little town down in the southern part of the state." He hesitated, looked Digger over again. In that interval he seemed to realize he was talking too much for a desk clerk in the Globe Hotel. "Don't you know her, mister?" he asked.

"Not very well," Digger answered. He knew from the clerk's tone of voice that this source of information had dried up for the time being. "You got a phone here?"

"Over there," the clerk answered, pointing toward a booth.

Digger entered the booth, plugged a nickel into the phone, and took care of the second thing that had to be done. He left the door of the booth open while he told them down at headquarters who he was, where he was, and what he had found. The clerk listened with all ears. They said they would send a squad car right away and Digger hung up.

THE clerk, his face paper white and his eyes blinking rapidly, was already out of his cubby hole.

"Mister, did you say that girl is dead?" he demanded.

"That's right," Digger answered.

"And the police are coming?" the clerk continued. There was consternation in his voice.

"Right again."

"Golly!" the clerk gasped. He headed up the stairs on the run. Digger followed as fast as he could but the little clerk moved with the speed of a startled rat. When Digger reached the top of the stairs the clerk was running down the hall. Rapping on each door, he was shouting a single sentence:

"The cops are coming."

The clerk had already rapped on

two doors without getting an answer. The next door brought out an alert little man with a round face and a bald head. He already had his coat on so all he had to do was put on his hat. He went down the back stairs.

By this time Digger had collared the clerk.

"Cut it out," he said.

"But the cops will rout everybody out," the clerk protested.

"I know they will."

"They'll ask questions."

"And they'll want them answered. And if nobody is here, nobody can answer them. I said cut it out."

The clerk tried to jerk loose from the hand on his shoulder. Digger tightened his grip.

"You ain't got any authority to stop me!" the little man squealed.

"I got my good right arm," Digger said. "I've also got plenty of authority to hold you or anybody else until the police arrive but the authority isn't half as important as my right arm. Are you going to stop rapping on doors or am I going to tap you on the jaw?"

The clerk goggled at the sight of the fist. "B—but—but—"

"This is murder," Digger said. "Haven't you got that fact through your head yet? This is murder."

"M-murder!" the clerk quavered.

"Sure. What did you think she died of: natural causes?"

The clerk wilted. "I thought she'd just died," he whispered. "If she had just died of something, I didn't see any reason why the guests should be bothered by the police. I didn't know it was murder, mister, honest I didn't. You didn't tell me—"

"I'm telling you now," Digger said. "Come along with me down to her room and get out your pass key. We're going to lock her door until the police arrive."

Digger opened the door of the room

and looked in. Miss Tessie Wright was still lying on the bed.

The Gideon bible was lying on the floor.

The detective story magazine that had been lying under the bible was gone.

"What the hell—"

DIGGER was in the room, looking under the bed, under the rocking chair, under the dresser, in the closet. The tattered magazine with the June 1945 date on it was gone.

Peeping in the doorway, the desk clerk saw the body on the bed. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. His face started to turn green. Clamping his hand over his mouth, he darted down the hall. Digger got to the door just in time to see him enter the room marked *Gents*.

Digger looked back into the room. There was an expression of intense irritation on his lean face.

"God damn it!" he said. "*God damn it!*"

The killer had passed this way so recently the very air seemed warm with his passage. The killer had returned. While Digger was downstairs, the killer had come back.

Maybe it wasn't the killer who had taken the detective story magazine. But somebody had taken it. Why? What did the killer or anybody want with an old detective story magazine? Why would anybody in his right mind run such a tremendous risk as returning to a room where a murdered woman lay in order to get—a detective story magazine?

Digger went down the back stairs. He walked very carefully, very softly, going down those stairs. Only minutes ago the killer had come this way. Or he was still in the building. He certainly hadn't come down the front stairs

or Digger would have seen him. That left the back stairs as the means of entrance and exit.

The back door was closed. There was another door at the left, also closed. Digger opened the door to the left. It led into a hallway to the front of the building. The desk was up there.

The killer hadn't gone that way. Or if he had gone that way he had waited until Digger and the clerk had gone upstairs, which wasn't likely. Men with murder fresh on their hands usually were rattled. They didn't like to hang around and wait for somebody to get out of the way so they could stroll out the front door. Not when a back door was open and handy.

Digger used his handkerchief to open the back door. He reached inside the knob and caught the latch by the handle. He regretted having smudged up any prints there might be on the doorknob upstairs, but the first time he had opened the door, he hadn't known the girl was dead, and the second time he had opened it, he hadn't known the killer had returned.

The alley was paved with granite blocks worn smooth by the passage of time and feet and iron-tired wagons and rubber-tired trucks. This alley and this paving were older than the automobile. But not older than Cain. And Cain had gone this way this night.

The alley was dark. It smelled of stale fish and quietly rotting garbage. To the right a hundred yards away cars were passing on the cross street. Thirty yards away to the left cars were passing on another street.

Just off the street to the left a bundle of rags was sitting beside an overloaded wheelbarrow. A rag picker. A cardboard and wooden box picker. One of the tribe that trudges all day long through the streets and alleys picking up boxes and waste paper and anything

else that is to be found.

Sitting with his bag against his wheelbarrow, the rag picker was smoking a pipe.

Digger walked up to him. The light from the street fell across him. He was colored. An ancient, withered, black face with a fuzz of gray whiskers.

"Hello, uncle," Digger said.

The rag picker took his pipe out of his mouth. "Evenin', boss," he slowly answered.

DIGGER took the clip of ones out of his pocket. He slipped one off, folded it. It slipped out of his fingers and fell on a granite block beside a burst-out shoe. Digger made no move to pick it up.

The black face looked at the bill, then up at Digger.

"I want to ask you some questions," Digger said.

The burst-out shoe moved slowly, a quarter of an inch at a time. The black eyes looked at the brick wall across the alley. They seemed unaware of Digger. Smoke puffed slowly from the corn-cob pipe.

The bill disappeared under the shoe.

"What you want to know, boss?"

"How long have you been here?"

The head wagged slowly from side to side. "I don't pay much mind to the time. I pushed the wagon in here and lit up the pipe."

"Did you see anybody come out of that door?"

The pipe went up and down. "You comes out of it, boss. I seen you."

"Did you see anybody else?"

The eyes looked at the brick wall across the alley. "I ain't been payin' much mind to it, boss. There was a little man comes out of th' do' a while ago."

"Uh-huh," Digger nodded. That would probably be the little man the

clerk had routed out of the room upstairs. "Has anybody else come out?"

Again the pipe went up and down. "She comes out."

"She?"

The ancient face nodded. "This woman, she went in about th' time I was pushin' th' wagon off from th' street. I set down and was startin' to light up th' pipe when she comes out again."

"Which way did she go?"

The pipe pointed. "Up th' street."

"Can you describe her? How was she dressed? What kind of a hat was she wearing? Her shoes, things like that."

Smoke puffed from the pipe while the rag picker thought about this. He was in no hurry. He had plenty of time. Digger didn't try to hurry him.

"She had on a kind of a gray suit. And a little hat stuck up on top of her head. And a veil. And gloves. Black ones, they was. I didn't pay any mind to her but she didn't make much noise when she walked—"

"Rubber-soled walking shoes," Digger said. "I'd wear them too, if I was in her business. Was she carrying anything when she came out?"

"Uh-huh."

"What?"

"Pocketbook. It was black too, like her gloves."

"Anything else that she was carrying?"

"Seems to me there was."

"What was it?" Digger's voice had a cutting edge. He was beginning to smell something, an intangible odor that he didn't like.

"A magazine," the rag picker said.

"A magazine?"

The pipe went up and down emphatically. "She had it all rolled up. And she was holdin' on to it like she was afraid she was gonna lose it."

A woman with a magazine had come out of the back door. And it was a woman who had gone down a ladder, snagging a pair of slacks on a nail, leaving the prints of a woman's shoes in the garden. A woman!

Suddenly Digger knew what he was smelling. Horse weeds! Horse weeds on a hot August afternoon.

There wasn't a horse weed within miles but he was smelling them just the same. In spite of the manhattans, in spite of the clerk's bottle, he was smelling horse weeds again.

"Thanks, uncle," he heard a strangled voice that he barely recognized as his own say.

HE WALKED up to the street. A third-run movie house, a saloon, a hamburger joint. A girl in a yellow dress holding hands with a sailor. A shooting gallery. A man in a pepper and salt suit, a bum in rags walking craftily along the sidewalk and trying to pretend he wasn't hunting for snipes. A boy and a girl examining the advertising material in front of the movie house.

He walked down the street. He drifted along, his shoes making no sound on the sidewalk. Inside he was as tight as a coiled spring. The sister of Cain had gone this way.

A couple with a curly-headed girl child looking in windows. A Chevrolet and a Ford going by on the street. A Packard and a Ford and a Chevrolet parked at the curb.

He went around the block. The air was heavy with the nauseous odor of horse weeds. A wind was scurrying through the street, blowing bits of paper and dust. It wasn't strong enough to blow away the odor of the weeds.

He prowled the neighborhood.

The sister of Cain, the woman in the gray suit, the black veil, the black

gloves, the woman who had walked without making a sound, clutching a magazine in her hand, he didn't see her anywhere.

And I decided Tessie Wright was probably a paranoid who was imagining things, he thought bitterly.

She had known something. She had known too much.

How had the woman in the black gloves known how much Tessie Wright knew?

Why had she come back to get the detective story magazine?

What made that magazine important?

Why had she killed the Weems baby? Why had she kidnapped it in the first place? Seemingly, there had been no effort to collect the ransom. Had the death of the child scared her out of collecting the money from Weems?

Why had she hung around, waiting silently for over two years? She was in danger. No matter how cleverly she had covered her trail, she was in danger. Why hadn't she cleared out? How had she known so infallibly that Tessie Wright knew something about her?

How had Tessie Wright found out—whatever it was she had known?

Where had Tessie crossed the path of the woman who wore the black veil and the black gloves?

"God damn it!" Digger said.

He held his nose but the odor persisted. Breathing through his mouth didn't help it even a little bit. Of course, it wouldn't help. He wasn't smelling the weeds with his nose, he was smelling them with his memory. He knew he would smell them until he got his hands on Cain's sister.

He went back to the hotel. The cramped little lobby was deserted. The clerk was not in his cubbyhole. There was a commotion, an argument of some

kind, going on upstairs. He went up the steps with the rubber treads and the yellow risers.

Two uniformed police were in the hall. They were arguing with the clerk. When Digger approached, they broke off the argument.

The clerk pointed an accusing finger at Digger.

"That's him," he said shrilly. "That's the man I was telling you about. That's the man who said he found her."

With ponderous treads, the cops moved toward him.

CHAPTER III

THE two cops didn't know Digger.

They made him put his hands against the wall and spread out his feet while they searched him for a gun. When they didn't find a gun, they looked disappointed. They had seen their pictures in the papers as "Officers Who Captured Dangerous Killer." A killer ought to have a gun.

They looked even more disappointed when he showed them the badge which said, "Private Detective." Digger sympathized with them.

"Sorry, boys," he said. "Hasn't homicide arrived yet?"

They told him homicide hadn't arrived but was on the way. They were from a squad car. They had picked up the radio flash and had come to investigate. They had found the clerk being sick in the can and the clerk had started shouting about the big man who had found the girl.

"You did find her," the clerk said.

"Have I denied it?" Digger asked.

Homicide arrived. Homicide shouted downstairs and one of the cops answered. Homicide came up the steps. Lieutenant Burkholt and two detectives in plain clothes.

Digger was disappointed. He had

hoped that Lieutenant Dirk was on duty and had been assigned to this case. He got along all right with Dirk.

Burkholt was a stiff standing man with a thin fringe of reddish hair around his almost bald head and a straggling red mustache. If he had ever laughed in his life, nobody had seen him do it.

"We had a call there was a dead woman here," Burkholt said. "Where is she?"

"In there," Digger said, nodding toward the room.

Burkholt stared at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I found her."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

Digger could see Burkholt grasp this fact and store it away in its proper pigeonhole for future reference. The lieutenant said nothing more. He walked stiffly to the room where Tessie Wright lay, his two men following him like stiff shadows. The three went in and closed the door. Ten minutes later Burkholt came out alone. He walked straight to Digger, who was leaning against the wall and smoking a cigarette. He looked the private operator up and down, his washed out blue eyes emotionless.

"Let me see your hands," he said suddenly.

Digger grimed. He extended his hands. "The nails are not broken and there is no flesh and blood under them. I saw those scratches on her face too, lieutenant."

Burkholt took Digger's fingers in his own square, flat hands. His hands had something of the feel of a dead fish about them. He studied Digger's fingernails in silence.

"How did you happen to find her?" he asked.

"She called my office this afternoon

and made a date to see me," Digger answered. Although he personally detested Burkholt, he had no intention of trying to hold out on the man. Burkholt was police, law and order.

"Um," the lieutenant said. "You still got your license as a private dick?"

"Yes."

"Is it up to date?"

"Certainly."

"What did she want to see you about?"

"I don't know. She called twice. The first time, according to my secretary who took the call, she wanted to know if the reward was still open on the Weems baby—"

"Hell—" Burkholt said.

"I know. That's what my secretary told her. She hung up. Then she called again later and wanted to know if the reward was still open on the Weems baby kidnapper."

"How'd she happen to call you on that?"

Digger shook his head. "You've got me, lieutenant. I don't know."

Crack!

BURKHOLT'S square left hand doubled itself into a fist and came up against Digger's jaw. It wasn't a knockout blow; it wasn't intended as such.

"Does that help your memory?" Burkholt said.

Digger put both hands flat against the wall behind him. He steadied himself. He reminded himself that Burkholt was a cop.

"You go to hell, lieutenant," he said.

For a second, Burkholt looked surprised. His left hand began to ball itself into a fist.

"If you hit me again," Digger said evenly. "Cop or no cop, they'll take you away from here in an ambulance."

His voice was calm and steady.

There was a trace of a smile on his lips. Only the light in his eyes showed the furious anger boiling inside him.

Burkholt saw that light. He was a cop, he had the forces of law and order behind him, but he sensed he had gone far enough. He let the fist drop back to his side.

"I can throw you in the can," he said.

"Go ahead," Digger said.

"I can take you down to headquarters and into the back room."

"In that case, I hope you've saved your uniform."

"Uniform?"

"You'll need it when you go back to swiping apples from the fruit stands on your beat."

"Yeah? How'd she happen to call you?"

"I told you once I don't know. The next thing I told you was to go to hell. You can take your choice."

"What do you know about her?"

"Not a thing."

"When was the last time you saw her alive?"

"I never saw her alive in my life."

"Were you trailing her for somebody?"

"I was not."

"Why'd you kill her?"

"Go to hell," Digger said.

"All right," Burkholt grumbled. "It ain't that I really think you killed her, it's that I think you're holding out on me. You came to see her. You must know something about her."

"Just what I've told you," Digger said. "You can call my secretary tomorrow and confirm the fact that a Miss Wright called me and asked me to come and see her. You can ask the hotel clerk what time I arrived here. You can ask him how much time I spent upstairs before I came down and called the police. You can ask your doctors

how long she's been dead. . . And whatever you think of any more questions to ask me, you can call me up and ask them."

DIGGER took his hands off the wall. He lit a fresh cigarette. He cocked his hat to one side. He walked down the hallway.

"You stick around town," Burkholt called after him. "That's an order. You stick around town or I'll have you jailed as a material witness."

"Who'll you hire to find me?" Digger called back.

He was still shaky mad when he reached the street, so shaky mad that he did not see the short, round-faced little man detach himself from the doorway across the street and unobtrusively follow him to his car. He slid in under the wheel and started the motor.

The round-faced man opened the door on the other side and sat down beside him.

"Just take it easy, pal," the little man said. "Just take it easy and this thing won't go off."

He wiggled the gun he was holding in his lap. It was a .32 caliber automatic, a snub-nosed black gun. The safety was off, Digger saw. He also saw the little man held the gun as if he knew how to pull the trigger.

He let his hands rest easily on the steering wheel. This was the man the clerk had routed out of the room upstairs. "Something for you, Mac?" he said. "Something you wanted to ask?"

"Yeah," Mac answered. "Drive this crate down on the river front, pal. Drive it slow and careful. There's one or two questions I want answered."

DIGGER drove slowly and easily.

He went down a narrow street that led to the river front. He drove under the elevated railroad tracks and along

the bumpy cobblestones beside the railroad. To the right, on the slope of the hill where the city had been founded, the old buildings had been cleared away to make room for a riverfront memorial. The war had stopped the memorial, and the slope was vacant and bare like a patched apron in front of the city. To the left the cobblestones sloped down to the muddy water of the river.

"Drive farther down," Mac said. "Go down four or five blocks farther and then go down close to the river where it's nice and quiet."

Digger followed instructions. He drove over granite cobblestones that had been laid in the days when hundreds of steamboats had tied up here. The great iron rings and chains where the boats had tied up were still visible but the boats were long gone. The railroads had killed the boats and now, with the exception of a gigantic excursion steamer and an old-time show boat which still produced melodrama, the river front was dark and deserted.

Digger stopped his car ten feet from the river. He could hear the soft lapping of the waves against the cobblestones. Across the water he could see advertising signs.

"What the hell were all the cops looking for?" Mac said.

"A dead woman," Digger answered.

"Huh?" There was no mistaking the genuine surprise in the little man's tone of voice. "Who was she?"

"She had registered as Tessie Wright," Digger answered.

"What?" the little man gasped.

"Somebody knocked her off? Are you sure, pal, are you sure?"

"I'm sure she's dead, she was in Tessie Wright's room, so I guess she is Tessie Wright. You know her?"

The question came in softly and easily, without emphasis, and the little

man answered before he thought.*

"Sure I knew her—" Then his mouth shut with a click. It was too dark for Digger to be certain but he knew the little man was staring at him and he was pretty sure the gun was centered directly on him. He kept his hands on the steering wheel and thought how lonely the water sounded on the cobblestones. A man dropped in here with a rock tied around him might feed the catfish for fifty years before his bones were found. And a .32 didn't make too much noise, especially when it went off in a car.

"What's your name?" Mac asked. "And what was you doin' in on this?"

Digger told him his name and who he was.

"A damned private eye," Mac grumbled. He didn't sound too pleased. "How'd you get in on this?"

"She called me," Digger said. "I still don't know why she picked me to call or what she wanted."

"Somebody got to her before you did?" Mac asked. He sounded a little more pleased now.

"Sort of," Digger answered. "Does it suit you better that way?"

"I didn't say it did."

"You didn't say it didn't. What's your angle on this business, Mac?"

"Pfft," Mac said. "I ain't got any angle now."

"Oh," Digger said. "She didn't talk to you either, or only a little bit? The desk clerk said one of the roomers in the hotel had been making passes at her. Were you that man?"

"I guess so. I didn't really make any passes at her, just kind of passed the time of day with her."

"What were you interested in, sex or money? Or both?"

The little man wiggled the gun. "I thought this gave me the right to ask the questions," he said.

"It does," Digger promptly answered. "Go ahead and ask. But I don't know from nothing and you don't seem to know any more. I thought if we pooled our information, maybe we'd get somewhere."

MAC was silent. He thought about Digger's proposition. "Me talking to a damned dick!" he said.

"I'm a private dick," Digger pointed out.

"It's all the same. I don't know which is worse."

Digger was hurt. "Have it your own way," he said. "I go along with the law as far as I can." He thought about Burkholt and his face darkened. There were times when the law wouldn't let you go along with it. "But I've never yet betrayed a confidence or cut a friend's throat."

The little man looked morosely at the river. "I don't know why she called you in," he said, shaking his head. "If I knew that, I might know what to do. But hell, I—"

"You were going to help her?"

Mac nodded. "She had kind of hinted at something. She didn't say who and she didn't say what but she had something on the string, something that she needed help to collect. I don't know what it was but she was scared of it."

"So my secretary said," Digger spoke. "You were interested in helping her collect a little side dough, is that it?"

Mac twisted on his seat. "Well, I wasn't sleeping with her and she didn't have any money but she thought she was going to get some. That was my angle."

"Did she tell you where she was going to get this money?"

Mac shook his head vigorously. "She hadn't made up her mind she could trust me. But the dough was hot. I

could tell that much."

"Um. She didn't even hint what it was?"

"Nope. But that was why she came to town. She said she was on a vacation, the first one she had had in four years, and she *was* on a vacation but that was only part of it. The other part, the big part, was this dough she figured she was going to collect."

"Where was she from?"

"Elmsville. That's down south somewhere. Probably just a bus honk. She worked in a church orphanage, or said she did, but she was always trying to be cagey. Now what's your angle? I've told you all I know. It's your turn to talk."

Digger told him about the telephone calls Angel had received. The little man listened in taut silence. "What do you make of it," Digger asked, when he had finished the story.

"It beats the hell out of me. Hell, I wonder if she figured to cut in on the Weems kidnapping?"

"I don't see how," Digger answered. "Unless she discovered the kidnapper and was going to collect the reward for his scalp—if there still is a reward—or was going to collect from her for keeping her mouth shut."

"Her?" Mac questioned.

"The cops think a woman kidnaped the Weems baby," Digger said. "One other thing. You were in her room, weren't you?"

"Maybe," Mac cautiously admitted.

"What kind of stuff did she like to read? I mean, did you notice any books or magazines lying around?"

"What the hell has that got to do with it?"

"I don't know that it has anything to do with it. I just wanted to know if you had noticed any books or magazines in her room."

Mac snickered. "I had my mind on

something else when I was in her room."

"I don't doubt it. But I still want to know."

The little man shook his head. "So far as I know, she couldn't even read. I never saw much as a newspaper in her room."

OUT on the river a diesel-pusher was shoving a string of barges upstream. Downstream the big stacks of the power plant on the opposite shore trailed long streamers of thin white smoke into the night sky. Across the river advertising signs blinked. A car came poking along the embankment, bouncing over the rough cobblestones, and Digger heard a girl giggle nervously.

"Well, what do you think?" Mac asked.

"I don't think anything," Digger answered. "What's your name and where can I get in touch with you?"

Mac laughed. "Not tonight, pal. I'll get in touch with you, if I need to, but you won't be getting in touch with me. Now if I was you, pal, I'd just set right here and smoke two cigarettes, one after the other, and I'd smoke them slow, pal, because this thing can make an awful hole in a man."

He shook the pistol in his hand. The car creaked as he opened the door and stepped out. He leaned in at the window, tapped lightly with the gun barrel on the glass. "I'd start on one of those ciggies now, pal. I'd start right now."

"Wait a minute—" Digger protested.

The little man was silent. The gun barrel rapped slightly on the door.

"All right," Digger said. He took a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, struck a match, cupped it in his hands. The flame made it difficult for him to see. When he looked up Mac was gone.

Digger smoked in patient slowness. He wondered what Mac had actually wanted to find out from him. And had he found it out? Digger thought he had. He thought the little man had gotten at least part of the information he was after. But not all of it. He hadn't learned about the woman in the black veil. But then, he hadn't asked. Come to think of it, he hadn't asked who had killed Tessie Wright. He had shown no curiosity on that subject whatsoever. Digger wondered how important the little man's reticence was. He finished his second cigarette, flicked it out of the window. It sailed in an arc, then its little flame was instantly sucked out as it landed in the muddy water moving past. Digger touched the starter. The motor coughed, then purred softly as the damp river air was sucked into the carburetor.

When no shot came, he slipped the car into low gear and drove slowly up the cobblestone embankment.

There was a telephone call he wanted to make.

He went up the narrow street and stopped in front of the first drug store. His watch told him it was well past eleven o'clock. But what the hell, Weems oughtn't to mind getting up even if he was in bed.

Digger looked up the number in the phone book, then plugged a nickel into the phone. The receiver popped in his ear as he finished dialing.

"What number were you calling, sir?" a feminine voice asked him.

"Cabany 4515," Digger said.

There was a moment of silence, then the same voice said, "That number has been disconnected, sir."

"Disconnected?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm trying to call Robert Weems. Has he been assigned another number?"

"I'll give you information, sir."

Information said no, Robert Weems was not listed. They had a Robert Weed. Was that the name you wanted, sir?

Digger said it wasn't. He hung up.

He went over to the liquor counter and bought a half-pint of the least-awful blend they had in stock. Then he went up to the fountain and bought a cup of black coffee. By the time he had finished the coffee, he had decided he would drive out and see Robert Weems.

Since he couldn't call the man, it was his only choice. And he wanted to see Weems.

CHAPTER IV

WEEMS lived in a two-story brick house set well back from the street. There was a big, well-trimmed lawn in front and a small, fenced-in playground and vegetable garden at the rear. Weems had been something of a bug on vegetables, Digger remembered. Liked to grow his own. Liked to offer his neighbors a basket of big red tomatoes. That type.

The neighborhood was suburban, and good, but not snooty rich. Weems, as Digger remembered, was an insurance man, the head of his own agency. Worth maybe a hundred thousand dollars. Income twelve to fifteen thousand a year. Not a wealthy man but a long way from the next W.P.A. Top of the middle class. Bottom of the wealthy class, if you believed there were such things as classes.

A light was burning in the living room.

Digger parked his car. He went up the winding brick walk. This yard he remembered, and this house, and the playground and the vegetable garden at the rear. He had been over the grounds

inch by inch when Gee Gee had been kidnaped, coming into the case because of the reward. After he had seen the playground in the rear, with its big sand pile, its slide, its teeter-totter and swing, and after he had talked to Weems and to the pale and frantic mother, the reward had not mattered so much. Gee Gee had been a much-loved child. The playground proved it. If Digger could have put her back into the playground, he would have asked no other reward.

Suddenly, thinking about the playground, he sniffed.

"God damn the horse weeds!" he muttered.

Opening, the half-pint, he let the liquor dribble down his throat.

The odor seemed to go away a little then. A little. Ghostlike, it slid away into some dark abyss. He could still catch lingering traces of it.

He had hated to come to this house because he had known he was certain to smell horse weeds here. Over the phone, maybe not, but here it was a lead-pipe cinch. As he rang the bell, he wished to hell Weems hadn't disconnected his telephone.

He heard chimes ring in the house, soft and musical. It should have been a pleasant sound, but it wasn't. To John Digger, the chimes sounded like a dirge.

He waited. There was no sound. He rang the bell again. Then he heard the footsteps coming toward the door. Over his head, a light flashed on and the door opened.

ROBERT WEEMS blinked at him from behind horn-rimmed spectacles. Thin and smooth-shaven, his face looked hollow in the glow from the overhead light. He was coatless and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, his hands smudged.

"What can I do for you?" he said. His voice was cold and emotionless. The words were friendly enough and there was no hostility in the tone. There was nothing in the tone. A muted loud speaker showed far more feeling.

"I'm John Digger. You probably don't remember me but I—I—" He couldn't go on. This was Gee Gee's daddy, this was the daddy who had built that playground for her.

Weems blinked at him. "I don't believe—"

"I worked—I worked on the kidnaping." Digger got the words out somehow.

"Oh." Weems seemed to withdraw within himself. His pale eyes studied Digger through the thick lenses of his glasses. "Yes," he said. "I recall you now. You tried to solve the kidnaping. What can I do for you?"

"I tried to call you," Digger said. "But your phone has been disconnected—"

"I'm leaving town," Weems said.

"Oh. Well, I can't say that I would blame you. This house—Could I talk to you for a few minutes, Mr. Weems? I'm sorry to revive unpleasant memories but something has come up." Digger was sweating. And the odor was coming back. He wished fervently for another drink.

Weems looked at him from dull eyes. "I don't understand," he said.

"I don't either. But I'd like to talk to you about it. I'm sorry to disturb you and Mrs. Weems—"

"You won't disturb Mrs. Weems."

"No? Well, that's fine. I thought when I first met her that she was on the nervous side—"

"You were right," Weems said. "She has been in an insane asylum for almost a year and a half."

"Huh!" Digger put his left hand against the door facing.

Weems nodded. "The shock of the loss of our daughter," he said. "But come in, Mr. Digger. I'll be glad to talk to you, since you've made the trip out here."

Weems turned and walked into the house. Digger followed him. His footsteps sounded loud on the floor and he seemed to need a long time to realize the rugs were gone. The rugs were gone from the big living room too, and the furniture as well. Two stiff-backed kitchen chairs stood in front of an open fireplace in which flames were glowing.

A blonde with rolled platinum hair left off stirring the flames with a poker as they entered.

"Miss Carter, I'd like you to meet Mr. Digger," Weems said.

"How do you do?" the blonde said. Her voice had a peaches-and-cream softness and the business suit did not conceal the softness that existed in other areas.

"Hello," Digger said.

"Miss Carter is my secretary," Weems explained. He noticed Digger's stare at the vacant room. "I've already shipped the furniture to California," he went on. "Miss Carter is helping me burn old personal letters. Would you like a drink, Mr. Digger?"

"I'd like two of them," Digger said firmly.

"I'll fix them," Miss Carter said. "I just love fixing drinks."

"What was it you had on your mind?" Weems asked.

DIGGER told him about Tessie Wright and the telephone calls she had made to his office. He told him how Tessie Wright had died and about the woman in the black gloves and the black veil who had taken the detective story magazine out of Miss Wright's room and who had, in all probability, killed the girl. Weems listened quietly

but asked no questions.

A tinkle of glass interrupted Digger as Miss Carter returned with the drinks and he looked inquiringly toward her.

"Go right on," Weems said. "I have no secrets from her."

Digger finished the story. Weems nodded silently. "What did you want with me, Mr. Digger?" he asked.

"Well, I thought you would want to know. There's something damned screwy." His eyes went automatically to Miss Carter but she didn't seem to mind.

Weems shook his head. "To me, it seems likely that this Wright girl was mentally unbalanced. I haven't mentioned it, but if I have had one call during the past two years, I have had fifty, most of them from people who just wanted an excuse to talk to me, but from several who were dead certain they had discovered the identity of the person who kidnapped my daughter. I think Miss Wright probably belongs to this last classification."

"That's what I thought at first," Digger said.

"Ah. And what led you to change your mind?"

"Her death," Digger answered. "Nobody would go to the trouble to knock off a nut."

Weems frowned. "That *does* seem reasonable," he admitted. "However, I imagine the discovery of the murderer will reveal no connection between her death and the information she may have thought she had on the kidnapping of my daughter. In other words, she was unbalanced on this subject but she was killed for some other, totally different reason."

Digger rattled the ice in his glass. He wished there wasn't so much ice. "You may be right at that," he admitted. "The thing I wanted to know is, had she got in touch with you?"

Weems took off his glasses and wiped them on a clean handkerchief he took from his pocket. He blew on them and wiped them again. Miss Carter swirled the ice in her glass and said nothing.

"She hadn't gotten in touch with me," Weems said. "I haven't had a call on my daughter's kidnapping in more than a month. One reason I am leaving town is the fact that so many people, well meaning but misinformed, persisted in arousing old and unpleasant memories." He looked at Digger.

"I'm sorry," Digger said.

The flames had died down in the fireplace. Miss Carter gave them a poke and they flared up again. Letters and old clothes were smouldering there. A little flame ran along the edge of a bundle of letters that was tied with a faded red ribbon. It ate at the ribbon and the letters fell apart.

"I'll always believe that the number of callers on this subject was one reason for my wife's breakdown," Weems said.

Digger got to his feet. "Then there's nothing you want done?" he said.

"No," Weems said. "Nothing." His voice broke. "I know of nothing that will—that will—No, there is nothing I want done. Good night, Mr. Digger."

Weems followed Digger to the door.

"Good night," Digger said. "Again, let me say, I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Weems said. "You just didn't know."

WHEN the door closed behind him, Digger hastily drank the balance of the half pint. He was carrying a load and he knew he ought to be feeling it, but for all the effect it was having the whiskey might have been so much water.

There was a hedge around the front porch. The light over the entrance was burning. Digger was standing on the porch. When he took the bottle

from his lips, he looked straight into the face of a woman looking over the hedge.

Only her head was visible.

Her face was covered by a black veil.

Like a witch in the night, she stared straight at him but did not seem to see him.

"Hey!" he said softly.

He started toward her.

Like a toy doll in a marionette show, her face slid down behind the hedge.

"Hey!" Digger said. "I want to talk to you. Wait a minute."

There was no sound, no patter of footsteps. A concrete drive ran beside the house. She had been standing in the drive looking over the hedge toward the front door.

If she ran along the drive, her footsteps should have been clearly audible.

The night was silent. There was no sound of running feet.

Digger jumped the hedge.

The drop was farther than he had anticipated. He hit on his toes on the concrete and went down, pitching forward and rolling to lessen the shock. Cat-like, he scrambled to his feet and squatted on the concrete, listening.

There wasn't a sound.

His first thought was that the woman was crouched against the hedge. Shadow from the porch light blackened the bottom of the shrubs. He waited until his eyes had accommodated themselves to the dim light.

No dark shadow showed against the dark hedge.

She wasn't there.

A faint creak from somewhere in the rear jerked his head in that direction. He listened. The creak did not come again.

Had she run silently along the drive to the back yard? He remembered the rag picker's description of the woman who had come out of the back door of

the hotel. "She didn't make much noise when she walked—"

The woman who had been looking over the hedge didn't make much noise when she moved either!

As silent as a drifting shadow, he moved toward the back yard. There was a light on a pole in the alley at the rear. The two-car garage was at the left. One door was open. The rear end of a car was dimly visible.

On the right side of the garage was the high wire of the big playpen. The wire was still there, the teeter-totter, the swing, the slide, and the sandpile.

Digger cursed under his breath. The foulest oaths he knew. He used them all.

"I should have thought he would have taken the stuff out of that playpen!" he said.

Weems hadn't. Perhaps he couldn't bring himself to touch the beloved toys.

DIGGER went to the right of the playpen, along the walk that ran beside the back end of the house. A flight of steps led down to the dark basement door. Another flight of steps led upward to the kitchen. He listened. A wind was going through the backyard, rustling leaves along the ground. There was no other sound.

Inside the house was silence too.

Looking through the back window of the big living room, Digger saw why everything was quiet in there. Miss Carter was backed up against the wall beside the fireplace. Weems was practically shoving her through the wall he was so close to her. She had her arms around his neck and was holding on.

Making love standing up, Digger thought, a little awed.

The activities of the human animal always amazed him. Here was Robert Weems—Yes, and here was Miss Carter too, he thought. From what he had

seen of Miss Carter, where ever she was there was going to be activity.

For a moment he was so entranced by the sight of what was going on inside the living room that he forgot all about the woman he was following. It shocked him to realize that during this moment she could have slipped up behind him and knocked his head off. He ducked down, waited, watched. The veiled woman didn't show.

He went on around the house, peeked in the front window.

They were still busy in there.

He hated to interrupt but he felt that Weems ought to know about the woman. He rang the bell. After all, love could wait a little while.

WEEMS took his time about answering the door. Digger didn't blame him. If he were in the insurance man's place, he wouldn't be in any hurry about answering bells either. The door finally opened. Weems looked out.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "What do you want now?" There was irritation in his voice.

Digger told him about the woman. Weems stared at him in obvious disbelief.

"Are you drunk?" he questioned.

"I wish to hell I was," Digger answered. "When I came out the front door, she was standing right there." He pointed to the hedge at the end of the porch.

Weems came out far enough to look at the hedge.

"I followed her around the house," Digger continued.

"And you couldn't catch her?"

"I *didn't* catch her."

Weems stared at him like an irritated owl blinking behind the bars of a cage. "What is the purpose of this ridiculous story?" he said at last.

"Purpose?" Digger said.

"Why do you tell me something like this? What's your purpose? What do you really want?"

"Hell," Digger said. "That woman is a killer. I wanted to warn you. I know I'd damned well appreciate it if somebody saw a killer lurking outside my joint and warned me. Don't you believe I actually saw a woman?"

Weems shook his head decisively. "Good night," he said. "If you come back again I'm going to have you arrested on a peace disturbance charge."

He went into the house and slammed the door.

Digger walked out to his car and got in and slammed the door. He had tried to do the man a favor.

He lit a cigarette and wondered if he actually was drunk. Had he seen that woman or hadn't he?

"I swear I saw her!" he muttered.

Looking toward the house, he caught a glimpse of Weems peeking out of a window. Starting the car, he drove away. If he hung around outside, Weems would probably call the county cops and try to have him thrown in the jug on a loitering charge.

Taking Clayton Road and the Express Highway, he drove back to the city. The big town was asleep as the honest citizenry got their rest after the day's toil in making beer or making shoes or making dresses, three important products of St. Louis.

His office was silent. Angel had locked up and gone home like a good girl. The faint trace of her perfume was still in the rooms. Going through the office, he entered his living quarters at the rear, and went to bed.

T' hell with it. A man had to get some rest.

He fully expected to wake up in the morning and see in the papers where Mr. Robert Weems—and maybe Miss Somebody Carter—had been quietly

murdered during the night by some unknown person who had chopped them into little bits.

It would, he thought drowsily, serve Weems right for being a pig-headed fool. But, on the other hand, if he had been as busy as Weems had been, he might not have been inclined to listen to reason either.

CHAPTER V

THE next morning, when Angel arrived for work, Digger was sitting at his desk moodily reading the papers.

"It ain't here," he said.

"What isn't here?" she asked expectantly.

"I got a job for you, young lady," he said. "I want you to go around to the secondhand book and magazine shops and buy a copy of every June 1945 detective story magazine you can find." He took a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and with one finger pushed it across the top of the desk to her.

She studied him thoughtfully. "Are you learning how the big detectives operate?" she asked.

"I'm learning how they don't operate," he answered. "You go buy the magazines."

She took the bill. "You haven't shaved this morning," she said.

He nodded.

"Have you had any breakfast?"

"Uh-huh. Two jiggers of rye, straight."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Is it that bad?"

"Just as soon as I woke up this morning, I could smell 'em," he said. "Be a good angel and go and buy the magazines for me."

Recognizing the mood, she came around the desk and put her hand on his shoulder. "What happened, John?" she asked softly.

"A woman got herself killed last night," he said. "It's almost a dead cinch that somebody else is going to get killed but I can't figure out who or why. For that matter, I haven't the ghost of an idea who did the killing last night, though I can figure out why easily enough."

He told her the whole story. She took two cigarettes from the package lying on his desk, lit them, gave one to him.

"Did you say this girl worked in an orphanage?"

"That's what Mac said. I haven't had a chance to check it. Mac might have been lying or she might have been lying. She may have been a waitress for all I know."

"It seems important to check her background," Angel said.

"I'll say it's important," Digger answered. "But I'm only one man. I can't check everything." He thought rather enviously of the investigative facilities Burkholt had at his command. Men and time and the power of the law! What couldn't be done with that?

"And Weems and his secretary were making love?" Angel continued.

"And how they were!" Digger answered.

"What about Mrs. Weems?"

"Didn't I tell you? She's in an insane asylum, has been there for a year and a half. If you're thinking that Weems and his secretary making love is wrong, remember that a year and a half is a hell of a long time."

"You're a lecher!" she said.

"I'm not," he defended. "I don't lecher after you, do I?"

"No, damn it, you don't!" she answered.

"Go get those magazines for me or I will," he said darkly. "Remember all I've had for breakfast this morning is two drinks of whiskey. And you know

what whiskey does to a man."

"You're making it hard for me to leave," she answered, sliding from the desk.

He smacked her on the fanny.

"I'll be right back," she said, hurrying out the door. "Don't go away."

DIGGER moodily continued reading his paper. There were no reports of murder in the county. On the second page he found this headline:

GIRL FOUND DEAD IN HOTEL ROOM

They had given the story six inches of space. Lieutenant Burkholt had gotten his name into the story, which probably pleased him, though not enough to make him smile. The lieutenant was promising speedy results in capturing the killer. There was no mention of the woman in the black veil, which maybe meant the lieutenant hadn't found out about her and maybe meant he was holding back this piece of news for a later edition. There were no pictures. There wasn't even much interest. Tessie Wright had come to town and gotten herself killed and so what?

Digger roused himself enough to shave. Then he went downstairs and had bacon and eggs and two cups of scalding hot black coffee. As he ate, he turned the case over and over in his mind.

Item: Two year old Gee Gee Weems is kidnapped. Six months later her decomposed body is found in a field of horse weeds. *Damn all horse weeds.* Ransom was not paid, killer was not apprehended.

Item: More than two years pass. The case is forgotten. Then Tessie Wright turns up in town and starts making inquiries about (1) a reward for the return of the Weems baby (2) a reward

for the kidnapper.

Item: Tessie Wright is strangled, presumably by a woman wearing a gray suit, a dark veil, and black gloves.

Item: Gee Gee Weems had been kidnapped by a woman.

Conclusion: It seems logical to assume that the woman who kidnapped Gee Gee Weems also killed Tessie Wright and that the two cases are definitely connected. It also seems logical to conclude that Tessie Wright was killed because she had discovered the identity of the kidnapper.

Question: How did Tessie Wright discover the identity of the kidnapper?

Question: How did the kidnapper know Tessie Wright had discovered her identity?

Question: Why had the veiled woman taken the detective story magazine from Tessie Wright's room?

Question: What was the veiled woman doing lurking around the home of Robert Weems?

Question: Why had Tessie Wright called him, John Digger? How had she gotten his name?

There were other facts and other questions. Weems' wife had gone nuts and was in an insane asylum. Weems and his secretary were hot about each other. Weems was leaving town, for good. Then there was the questions of the reward. Tessie Wright had been interested in the reward, very much interested.

Digger went back to his office and picked up the telephone book. He looked up the number and called the office of the *Times*.

"Ted Shaw, please."

THEN Ted Shaw was on the phone, bored, and indifferent, the way newspaper men usually are.

"Ted, this is John Digger."

"Ah. The old sleuth himself. What

goes on in your business, John?"

"Murder and love-making," Digger answered. "The same as always. The human animal's beloved pastimes."

Ted Shaw laughed. "You seem to take a dim view of the human race."

"Not dim, just realistic. Ted, do you remember the Weems case?"

"I ought to remember it. I wrote the *Times* stories on it." Interest quickened in Shaw's voice. "Why do you ask?"

"About the reward the *Times* offered for the capture of the kidnapper. Is that reward still good, Ted?"

"*Et tu, Brute?* I checked with the old man on it only yesterday and he said it would be good until Gabriel blows his trump. Pounded on his desk when he said it, too, and made me a little speech about how the *Times* stands for law and order and the apprehension of killers and the increase in circulation—"

"Hey! Wait a minute."

"What? I was only telling you what the boss said."

"I heard you. How did you happen to ask him if the reward was still good? That case is over two years old. How did it happen that you suddenly went running into the boss and started asking him such questions?"

"This girl wanted to know," Ted Shaw answered.

"What girl?"

"She wouldn't say. She called on the phone and wanted to know if the reward was still open. Since I had handled the case, they referred the call to me. I had to go ask the old man if he was still willing to lay it on the line—"

"What time was this?"

"About four o'clock."

"Then she called you after she called my office."

"Uh. Did she call you too?"

"Uh-huh."

"And the man, did he call you too?"

"What man?"

"The man that called here about two o'clock yesterday afternoon and asked the same question. I was out and didn't get the call. They put a note on it on my desk. He said he would call back, but he didn't, unless he was the buzzard who called this morning."

"What?" Digger was sitting stiff and straight in his chair, shouting into the phone. "Did somebody else call this morning?"

"Uh-huh," Ted Shaw said. "He did. They did. Somebody did. About thirty minutes ago."

"Who was he?"

"Not so loud," Ted Shaw protested. "You want half the town to hear you? He didn't say."

"Did you ask him?"

"Four or five times. I even had the call traced. It was made from a public phone in the bus terminal across the street. I went bounding over there, but hell—"

"You didn't find him?"

"Nope. Hell, the joint was full of people. Could I go around asking each of them if they had just called the *Times*?"

"Then at least two, and maybe three people, have called the *Times* on the Weems baby reward within the past twenty-four hours and you haven't got the name of any of them."

"You make the fourth," Shaw said. "And I have the name of one them?"

"Who?"

"You," the reporter cooed into the phone. "John Digger, private dick. I've got his name. And I'm waiting for him to start talking. Make with explanatory noises, John. Why this sudden interest in the Weems baby kidnapper? Why are all these people calling up here and asking us if there

is a reward? Why are *you* calling up?"

Digger hastily took the phone away from his ear and looked at it as if it had suddenly bitten him. "Well—" he said.

"No evasions, John," the phone said. "You're talking to the press, boy. And the press puts your name in the paper. Not to mention your picture. How would you like a great big photograph of your smiling countenance on page one? '*Solves Kidnapping Mystery.*'"

"Look here," Digger said.

"That's where you'll see yourself, John. I, personally, will write the caption and the story. What do you know about this business, John?"

"I don't know a damned thing," Digger said. "I'm just trying to find out something."

"So am I," the reporter said. "I'm trying real hard. In the interests of justice and five grand. There's five grand going to the man who finds the Weems baby kidnapper, John—"

"I heard you the first time. But I just don't know anything. I'm in this business up to my neck and I don't know whether I'm coming or going. If I get anything I promise you I'll give it exclusively to the *Times*."

"We appreciate that, John. We appreciate it very much. Where are you?"

"At my office. Look. This woman who called you yesterday afternoon. Did she ask about the reward for the kidnappers or for the baby?"

"The baby?" Shaw questioned. "Have you gone batty, John? Have you been smoking the weed? The baby—"

"I know," Digger gritted. "And I'll be god damned thankful to you if you won't remind me of it. What did she ask?"

"She asked about both. What the hell does that have to do—"

"I don't know," Digger answered.

He heard the door of his reception room open. The door between his office and the reception room was closed and he could not see who had come in. "I've got a visitor," he said. "So long, Ted. I'll keep you informed."

"Okay, John," Shaw answered, and hung up.

"Angel," Digger called. "Did you get those magazines?"

THE door of his office opened. A woman was framed in it. She was wearing a black veil. A black purse was clutched in two black-gloved hands. She was wearing a tailored suit of alternate black and gray squares. Incongruously her feet were encased in saddle oxfords, the type worn by teen-age girls.

Digger started to rise.

"Don't bother," she said. Her voice was cold, frigid with gracial overtones. There was a cracked note in it.

"But—"

"I said not to bother." The voice grew colder. Without taking her eyes off him, she opened her purse.

He sat down very slowly and very gently. He didn't make any sudden moves. He kept his hands in plain sight.

The gun was a .22. A little pearl-handled automatic, a woman's gun. It had to be properly aimed but if it was aimed right, a .22 bullet in the heart could kill a man but fast. This woman was holding the .22 as if she knew what she was doing.

"I'm going to kill you," she said.

Digger sat very stiff and very straight. He wished fervently for the bottle in his desk drawer. Just a little nip would help but he knew better than to reach for it.

"I guess you know what you're doing, lady," he said.

"Of course I know what I'm doing!" The words seemed to burst from her

lips. The tinny note in her voice grew stronger, the jangle increased.

The jangle in her voice, the tinny note, scared Digger to the verge of paralysis.

"Won't you sit down," he said.

"No, I won't sit down."

He could feel sweat on his forehead. He nodded toward the package of cigarettes lying on his desk. "Would you care for one?"

"No. I don't want any of your filthy cigarettes."

The sweat was forming in his eye brows. He wondered if he could upend the desk and throw it at her. The desk was too heavy, he decided. Maybe he could duck down behind it. The heavy wood would slow and perhaps stop a .22 slug.

But what if she didn't try to shoot through the desk? What if he ducked down behind it and she just walked around it? She could empty the gun into his back before he could move. The sweat ran down the bridge of his nose.

"Would you mind telling me why you are going to kill me?" he ventured.

"You know why."

She spat out the words as if she was anxious to get them said. Yet she was enjoying this. He could see she was enjoying this. It satisfied some sadistic yearning in her make-up. He hoped fervently she was enjoying it enough to let him stall for a few minutes.

"I'm afraid I don't know why, lady."

"You're a liar."

DIGGER swallowed. The sweat was in his eyes now and he didn't dare wipe it out. The least sign of motion would send her finger pressing against the trigger, would send lead spurting from the barrel of the little gun like water from a hose.

He shrugged. "Have yourself a good time," he said.

Her eyes glinted at him. "I am having a good time," she said. "For two years I've dreamed of the day when I would find you. I could chop you up with an axe and enjoy every drop of blood that ran out of you." She nodded. "Possibly I'll do that, after I've shot you." The nod turned to a frown. "But I don't have an axe! Why didn't I think to bring an axe?"

"That's too bad," Digger said. His hands lying on the desk moved toward the package of cigarettes, the fraction of an inch at a time.

"What are you going to do after you kill me?" he said.

Her eyes blazed. "What difference does that make?"

"Most people would think it made a difference. You know what they do to murderesses in this state?"

A sly note appeared in the voice. "Not to me. They won't do anything to me."

"I was afraid of that," Digger said. "You haven't by any chance got the wrong man, have you?"

"I've got the right man."

"Are you sure? Who do you think I am?"

"Your name is Digger," she answered.

His throat was dry like a dusty road in the summer time. He wanted to swallow and couldn't. His eyes never left her face. The veil hid her features but he was sure he had seen this woman somewhere before. Where? What the hell difference did it make?

"Mind if I smoke?" he said.

"Smoke if you want to. You'll smoke in hell soon enough."

"Thanks," Digger said. He took a cigarette from the package, lit it, kept the package in his right hand.

"Who are you?" he said.

"You know who I am."

"I know you're as nutty as a peach

orchard boar but I don't know who the hell you are," Digger said.

He threw the package of cigarettes straight at her face and went over the top of the desk like a tackle opening a hole in the line. The package of cigarettes hit her, startled her. The sight of Digger coming over the top of the desk must have startled her even more. She pulled the trigger of the gun.

Smoke and flame seemed to explode in front of Digger's face. The muzzle of the gun had gone up when the package of cigarettes landed but she had brought it down again plenty fast. She fired it right in his face.

Then he had his hand on the gun, shoving the muzzle down. It went off again. He felt a stinging sensation in his left hand. He brought his right hand down across her wrist. All the strength in his body was in that blow.

He heard her wrist bones snap.

He heard the gun hit the floor.

He kicked it under his desk, grabbed her arms.

She fought him like a wildcat. She kicked, scratched, clawed. In spite of the broken wrist, she jerked one arm free, flailed him across the head.

"Cut it out, lady."

She struck at him again, started to scream at the top of her voice.

"He's attacking me! Help! Help!"

She was yelling loud enough to raise the roof.

OVER her shoulder Digger caught a glimpse of Angel standing in the reception room. Her arms full of magazines, she was staring very pensively at them.

"Help!" the woman screamed. "Oh, won't somebody help me! He's attacking me!"

Shoving her head up under Digger's chin, she bit him in the neck.

He broke her grip, tripped her. She

thudded to the floor, slid into the corner of the room. From this position, she could see the gun under his desk. Whimpering, she tried to crawl toward it.

He headed her off and she tried to bite him in the leg.

From the doorway, Angel said: "Are your women always so reluctant, John?"

"You go get a doctor! And be damned fast about it."

The tone of his voice sent her out of the office in a hurry. There was a doctor in the building.

Digger shoved the woman back into the corner of the room. "Lady, will you please stay where you're put?" he begged.

The door of the office burst open. The janitor with a pipe wrench in his hands, stuck in his head. "What's going on here?"

"Come in, Al," Digger begged.

The janitor came into the office. The woman was sitting yelling in the corner. Al looked at her and at Digger. He hefted the wrench.

"If you've got to hit somebody, for cripe's sake, hit her," Digger said. "I'm too chicken-hearted to do it myself."

Al let the wrench sag.

Feet pounded in the hallway. Gun in hand, the cop on the beat came bouncing into the office. "What's going on here?"

"That's what Al asked," Digger said. "Come in. Come in. This is one time I was damned glad to have the law come puffing and panting to the rescue."

The cop pushed his way into the office. "What the hell you doing, shamus?"

"Trying to stay alive," Digger answered.

"A woman was yelling she was being attacked. Is this the woman?" He

pointed to the corner.

"This is the woman who was yelling," Digger said. "The attack was her idea, not mine."

The woman pointed a black finger at Digger. "He murdered my baby," she screamed. "For two years I've been looking for him. Last night I caught him. Arrest him, officer."

"Oh," Digger said. He shook his head. "I thought I had seen you before but that veil confused me."

The cop looked confused. He knew Digger. The detective was not the type who attacked women or murdered babies.

High heels scurried in the hall way. "This way, Doctor," Angel's voice said. Angel came rushing in. Following her was a youthful medico with the regulation small black bag.

The place was getting crowded.

"Where's the patient?" the doctor asked.

Digger pointed. The doctor started toward her. The woman began to scream again. "He murdered my baby. And he tried to attack me. Arrest him. Don't you touch me. Don't you dare."

The doctor backed away. He turned startled eyes toward Digger.

"You men hold her," he said. He laid his bag on the desk, opened it, took a hypodermic syringe from its case. With deft fingers, he fitted a sterile needle into place, picked up a small vial of clear liquid.

THE woman yelled. She kicked, scratched, clawed. It was all the three men could do to hold her. The needle went home. The plunger was shoved down in the syringe.

"Hold her for a few more minutes," the doctor said. He looked at the policeman, at the janitor, and then his eyes settled on Digger. "How long has she been this way?"

"I don't know," Digger said. "Her husband told me she was in an insane asylum and had been there for a year and a half."

"Oh. How did she get here?"

"She must have escaped."

"Who is her husband?"

"Weems. Robert Weems."

"Something new every minute," a voice said from the doorway. Ted Shaw, an elfish grin on his round face, pushed his way into the room. He looked cheerfully around. No one paid any attention to him.

The woman's efforts to break away were growing weaker. Digger left the job of holding her to the cop and the janitor. He went around his desk, reached under it, picked up the little automatic with the tips of his fingers. Holding it like it was a snake, he laid it on his desk. Then he sat down and opened the desk drawer.

There was sweat on his face. He wiped it off. "Pardon me while I take a drink."

The doctor, kneeling beside his patient, rose to his feet. He came around the desk to Digger.

"Hold still a minute," he said, taking the detective's head in his hands.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

The doctor ignored the question. He nodded to himself, opened his bag, took out a bottle of antiseptic solution and reached for the absorbent cotton.

"I suppose you know part of your ear has been shot off," he said.

"And you had better check the little finger on his left hand," Angel spoke.

"What?" Digger said.

"Just be quiet," the doctor said. He dabbed at Digger's ear with the cotton. He put on a bandage and taped it in place. Then he started working on the finger. Half the nail was gone. When the antiseptic solution got to the raw flesh, Digger hastily took another

drink of whiskey.

In the corner Mrs. Robert Weems was quiet at last. The cop stood up. He took his notebook out of his pocket. "Now if you'll just tell me what happened and then come down to the office and sign a complaint—"

Digger shook his head. "I'll tell you what happened but I won't sign a complaint. There's no point in complaining against a paranoid maniac. Don't you agree, doctor?"

The doctor nodded.

CHAPTER VI

"SHE was the woman I saw last night at Weems' house," Digger said. "That much is certain. I don't know how she vanished but she might have slipped down into the basement or gone up into the kitchen. I saw her and she saw me."

He opened another magazine. Ted Shaw, his round face alive with interest, leaned forward. Angel picked up the bottle of whiskey from Digger's desk and took it out into the reception room. Out there, she put it in the drawer of her own desk. Digger heard the lock click.

An ambulance had taken Mrs. Robert Weems away. The cop had phoned in a report and gone back to his job on the beat. The doctor and the janitor had gone back to their respective occupations. The smell of burned powder was still faintly present in the room.

"The question is, seeing me at the home that had once been hers, how did she happen to think I was the person who had kidnapped her baby?" Digger said.

"Crazy people get crazy ideas," Ted Shaw said.

"Uh-huh. But how did she happen to get that particular idea? That's the sixty-four dollar question."

"I don't know how she got it," Ted Shaw answered. "I suppose it just occurred to her. She was looking for the person who had kidnapped and murdered her baby. She saw you coming out of the house. To her warped mind, you were the person who had done it. Does that make sense?"

"Of a sort," Digger answered slowly. "Maybe and maybe not. The trouble is, you never know what a nut is thinking."

Remembering how firmly she had held the gun, he shivered, and looked longingly toward the desk out in the reception room. Angel shook her head.

"Did she kill this Wright woman?" the reporter asked. "To my mind, *that's* the sixty-four dollar question, not how she happened to come gunning for you."

"Tessie Wright was strangled and her neck was broken," Digger answered. "Do you think Mrs. Weems was strong enough to do that job?" He put one magazine aside, reached for another from the pile on his desk.

"Christ, I don't know," Shaw answered. "A nut is likely to be as strong as an ox. According to your story, she was wearing the same clothes—"

"The same kind of clothes anyhow."

"Well—"

"There is such a thing as coincidence, you know. We have decided that the kidnapper of Gee Gee Weems and the murderer of Tessie Wright are one and the same person. Would Mrs. Weems kidnap and murder her own youngster?"

"Hell, I know that doesn't make sense," the reporter answered. "But she could have done it. She's a nut now. Maybe she was a nut then. How do we know she didn't suddenly go wacky, steal her kid, kill it, then come back and play the part of the grief-stricken mother?"

"We don't know it," Digger answered. "She is certainly capable of murder. But—how did she know Tessie Wright was in town? How would Tessie Wright get to her? Remember, so far as we know, Mrs. Weems was in an insane asylum until—" He broke off, wondering how long the woman had been running loose. Too damned long, he decided, feeling tenderly of his ear. "Anyhow I'm damned glad she's not loose now."

"So am I," Angel said thankfully.

"Thanks, Angel," Digger said. He picked up another June 1945 magazine, leafed through it, was suddenly looking at his own picture.

IT WAS a small photo off down in the right-hand corner of the right page. *John Digger, one of the private investigators who worked unsuccessfully in an effort to solve the tragic kidnapping and murder.* He read the words without seeing them. His eyes kept going over to the left hand page, to the picture there.

Again he was smelling horse weeds.

The photo showed a two-year old with long black curls.

Gee Gee Weems, victim of the kidnapper and murderer.

"By God!" Digger said. He slapped the magazine down on the desk. "So that's how she knew!"

"Who knew what?" Ted Shaw said. He came around the desk to look at the magazine.

"That's how Tessie Wright knew who I was and how she happened to call me," Digger said. "She saw my picture and my name in this magazine."

"Um," Ted Shaw said. "My story."

"Did you write this?"

"Sure. Hell, you know I wrote it. I got a release from you to use the pic. Weems wouldn't give me a release to use his picture or that of his wife. I

got Gee Gee's picture out of the morgue and when the story appeared, Weems threatened to sue me. He raised the very old ned because I used his youngster's picture."

"I don't blame him," Digger said. He leaned back. Ted took the magazine around to the easy chair, sat down, and started reading. Angel perched on the arm of the chair. Digger pulled the sliding leaf out of his desk and put his feet on it. He wondered if he could slip into the reception room and get the bottle of whiskey without Angel seeing him.

He felt as if he needed a drink.

"Wonderful writing," Ted Shaw said. "Listen to this—"

"I'll listen some other time. Right now I want to think. And try to read without moving your lips."

Shaw looked hurt.

Item: Tessie Wright read the story of the kidnapping of Gee Gee Weems in a magazine.

Conclusion: From that story, she deduced the identity of the kidnapper.

Digger got slowly to his feet. He walked back and forth across the office, back and forth. Shaw continued reading. He was having a big time reading his own story, was this reporter. Angel looked quizzically up at Digger.

"How did she do it, Ted?" Digger asked.

"How did she do what?" Shaw answered.

"From reading that story, how did Tessie Wright know who kidnapped Gee Gee Weems?"

The reporter's eyes were round and owlish. "It's not possible," he said. "I wrote the story and I didn't know who kidnapped Gee Gee. Since I didn't know, even unconsciously I couldn't have revealed the identity of the kidnapper."

"That's what I thought," Digger

said. He resumed his pacing. Back and forth, back and forth. Angel watched him.

"Could she have recognized the picture?" she asked.

"So far as I know, the picture of the kidnapper is not in that magazine," he answered. "My picture, Gee Gee's picture, the picture of a couple of county detectives, a state patrolman—" He looked suddenly at her.

"In the name of heaven," he said.

All over he was cold. Goose pimples were rising along the back of his neck, along his arms, along his lower back. He was colder than he had been when Mrs. Weems was holding that .22 on him, spitting words at him, spitting at him with her out-of-focus eyes. He shook his head.

"I am a fool and the son of a fool. My grandfather was a fool too."

STILL shaking his head, he went into the next room. Taking off his coat, he unlocked the chest of drawers.

When he came back into the office, he was slipping his coat back into place.

The shoulder holster made a barely perceptible bulge under his left arm.

Slight as the bulge was, Angel saw it.

"You two want to go for a ride?" Digger asked.

Shaw looked up. "You're interrupting my reading."

"Do you want to go for a ride?"

Angel was already looking for her hat.

"Is it important?" Shaw asked.

"As important as a piece of five grand," Digger said.

Shaw came out of the chair like a jack coming out of its box. "The hell you say! Let's go. Where are going?"

"We're going down to the town where Tessie Wright lived. We're going to try to find where two trails cross."

"Oh," Shaw said.

Angel, clutching her hat in one hand and her purse in the other, was already at the front door.

Digger locked it as they went out. Any clients who thought they had business with him would just have to wait.

Digger drove to a service station, filled the car with gas, had the oil checked, and the windshield cleaned. Then he headed south.

"It may be night before we get there," he said.

THE sign said: ELMSVILLE. Pop. 1,501. WATER SUPPLY APPROVED.

Elmsville was tucked in between the rolling hills, a sleepy little town in a sleepy valley. In the days when the railroads were building, the rails had passed it by. Later, when concrete highways were being built, the highways had passed it by too. The air lines had never heard of the town. When the rocket liners start flying to the planets, they will miss it too.

One thing could be said for Elmsville. It was a good place to raise kids. Clean air, lots of sun, good water, hills and streams for them to grow up on.

When they grew up, they went away, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, some of them, Denver, Los Angeles. Elmsville was the borning place, the growing up place. The earning-a-living place was someplace else.

Tessie Wright had stayed here.

Digger pulled into the first service station. A youth in blue overalls left off changing a tire and strolled over to them, rattling his changer as he came.

"Fill it with gas and check the oil, and water," Digger said. He got out, walked around to the back of the car. The attendant stuffed the hose into the tank.

"Do you know a Miss Tessie Wright?"

The attendant looked closely at Digger, then nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Her old daddy was here about noon hitching a ride. I got him a lift on a truck going all the way."

"Where was he going?"

"After her. The police called up and said she was dead." The youth was trying to keep his interest covered. "You know her?"

"I never met her," Digger said. "You say her father hitch-hiked up to claim the body?"

"Uh-huh."

"Poor people?"

"Pretty poor. He old man owns a hill farm. Sometimes he makes a crop, sometimes he don't. Eight gallons, mister."

Digger nodded. The youth put the hose back on the pump, replaced the cap on the gas tank, went forward to the hood. Digger reached inside the car and unlatched it for him.

"You know where she worked?"

"Over at the orphanage. You need a quart, mister."

"Put it in. Where's the orphanage?"

"Down this street and out to the edge of town. It's a big brick building. Used to be a girl's school a long time ago. You want the twenty-six or the thirty-one cent oil, mister?"

"The thirty-one. Twenty weight."

Digger lit a cigarette and waited. Angel and Ted Shaw climbed out of the car. Angel sniffed the air.

"Just to smell air like this makes me feel good," she said.

"You sound like Maud Muller," Digger said. "Who runs this orphanage?"

"Mrs. Muller," the attendant answered. He frowned. "I don't know whether or not her name is Maud, though."

"It doesn't matter," Digger said. "How much do I owe you?"

"One fifty-two for the gas and thirty-

one for the oil. One eighty-three in all."

Digger paid him. They climbed back into the car. Night was drifting down from the hills.

THE orphanage was an old brick building sitting in the midst of five acres of huge elm trees. There were kids in front of it, kids on both sides of it. The twilight was alive with laughter and with yells. Here in the twilight, they were playing games.

Digger turned into the drive and stopped. He had to stop. There were four kids in the drive in front of him. As soon as he stopped, there were two trying to get in the left window, two more at the right. Three were trying to climb on top of the hood.

"Where would I find Mrs. Muller?"

"Over there in the small house," a fifteen year old in the left window answered. "Are you bringing us something, mister?"

"Not now," Digger said. "Would you mind letting me drive over to see Mrs. Muller?"

The fifteen year old got out of the window. "Hey! Get off the car, you kids. How can this gentleman drive if you're in the way?"

Clearing his comrades off the car, the fifteen year old acted as a scout. Running ahead of the car, his body outlined in the lights, he kept the drive clear, and directed Digger to a parking spot.

"Go right in the back door of the office, mister. Mrs. Muller is in there."

"Thank you," Digger said. He stepped out of the car, took a half dollar out of his pocket. The boy's eyes grew round at the sight of the coin but he shook his head. "No, thanks, mister."

"Go on and take it," the detective urged.

"I can't, mister. We only take money that we earn."

Digger tossed the coin into the air, caught it. "You watch my car until I come back. That's a job. I'll pay you a half dollar for the job."

"Gee, thanks." The half dollar went out of sight in the pocket of a pair of overalls. "You'll find her right there in the office." He pointed toward a lighted back door. "They're having a party."

"That's nice. What's the party about?"

"It's a going-away party," the fifteen-year old said. "One of the little kids is going away." He sounded sad, as if he wanted to go away too, but didn't have a chance and never would have a chance.

Angel and Ted Shaw followed Digger to the back door.

"I still don't know what we're expecting to find here," the reporter said.

"If I knew, I'd probably go in the other direction," the detective grimly answered.

Angel kept silent. She had been silent ever since they left the office.

A chorus of excited squeals was audible through the back door. Digger rapped. The squeals dropped into silence. There was a patter of feet. The door opened.

A little girl with long black curls looked up expectantly at him through the screen. She was about four, with a round, happy face.

"Hello," Digger said.

The expectancy died away from her face. She started to close the door.

"Who is it, dear?" a woman's voice said.

The four-year old backed away. A gray-haired woman with the kindest face Digger had ever seen in his life looked out at them.

"Won't you come in?" she said,

opening the screen door.

"Thanks," Digger said. "Are you Mrs. Muller?"

"Yes."

HE STEPPED inside, into a small office. An ancient roll-top desk, a decrepit swivel chair, benches against the walls on two sides of the room. Two suitcases and innumerable boxes piled on the farther bench. Two doors, one opening into a kitchen, the other opening into the front of the house.

Youngsters of all ages stared round-eyed at the big man who had come in the back door. Silence. They waited for him to speak. The four-year old had pushed herself back into the group. She had on a little black coat and white shoes.

"I'm John Digger," the detective said. "This is Angel Marks, my secretary, and Ted Shaw, a reporter."

"I'm very glad to meet all of you," Mrs. Muller said. "Won't you come in and sit down. Children, make room on the bench for the lady and the two gentlemen to sit down."

Little girls—they were all girls—scurried to make room for them. They didn't sit down. Mrs. Muller saw they didn't sit down.

"Something I can do for you?" she quietly asked.

Digger looked at the little girls. "I would like to talk to you about Miss Tessie Wright," he said.

Mrs. Muller's face did not lose its smile. The words did not seem to mean anything to her. "Of course," she said. "Children, run in the front room and play while I talk to this gentleman. Run along, now. You too, Gee Gee. When your father comes, I'll let you know."

They went reluctantly, their faces revealing their disappointment. Visitors here sometimes brought candy and

chewing gum and apples and oranges. True, these visitors did not seem to have brought anything, but they might have chewing gum in their pockets.

Digger nodded toward the bags. "Is one of the youngsters leaving?" he said.

Mrs. Muller shooed the last reluctant little body out of the room, closed the door. "The little Thompson girl is leaving," she said. "Her father is coming for her tonight. When you knocked, we thought you were he and she ran to open the door." Her face had changed now that the kids were gone. "We just learned about Tessie today. The poor girl."

"She loves her daddy, huh?" Digger said. Across the room he was suddenly aware that there was terror in Angel's eyes. Her face was white and her throat was working.

"Who? Oh, the little Thompson girl. She's crazy about him. And he's crazy about her too. Brings her presents all the time. She is a paid child, you know."

"How does she happen to be here?" Digger asked.

"Her mother died and her father had no way to take care of her so he asked us to keep her. He plans to make his home in California now, and he is taking her with him. What did you want to know about Tessie?"

Tires grated on the gravel drive outside the house. Digger listened. The car stopped. A door slammed. A second door slammed. High heels moved on the sidewalk outside. There was the softer sound of a man's shoes.

Digger moved. He stepped back against the wall so that the person entering the room would not see him immediately. His hand went inside his coat as if he was looking for a package of cigarettes.

His face was gray.

Ted Shaw blinked at him. "What's

wrong, Jake?"

"Nothing, Ted," he answered.

Angel swallowed. Her eyes were riveted on the door.

"About Tessie—" Mrs. Muller said.

"We'll talk about her later," Digger whispered.

THE door opened. High heels clicked as Miss Carter entered the office.

Following close behind her, Robert Weems blinked owlsh eyes behind heavy glasses.

"Mr. Thompson," Mrs. Muller said. "Come right in. Gee Gee's things are packed and she is ready to go. I'll call her."

She turned to the inner door, called: "Gee Gee!" Your father is here for you. Come, dear."

There was a scamper of feet in the living room.

Weems saw Angel Marks. He saw Ted Shaw. He nodded casually to them. He was watching that inner door, listening to the sound of those scampering feet coming toward him. Then, out of the corner of his eyes, he saw John Digger.

He didn't know Angel Marks. He had seen Shaw before but he didn't seem to remember the reporter.

Digger, he knew.

Weems seemed to freeze. His face went blank. He didn't turn to stare at Digger. He just looked at the detective out of the corner of his eyes.

Digger didn't move. His hand was inside his coat.

Running feet tore the floor between the living room and the office. Gee Gee entered. She was running as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Daddy!" She was a happy kid. She was a pleased kid. She was a tickled kid.

She leaped into her father's arms.

Like an automaton, Weems stooped

and picked her up. She flung her arms around his neck. His face was buried in her curls.

A puzzled frown was on Ted Shaw's face. "Thompson?" the reporter said, half aloud. "*Thompson?*"

"Shut up, Ted," Digger croaked.

For the first time, Miss Carter was aware of the detective's presence. She looked at him. Her mouth popped open. She started to scream but the sound died in her throat.

Weems turned slowly to face Digger. His movements were stiff.

His eyes begged.

Digger shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he heard a voice say. It was his own voice.

Weems' face sagged. In a moment, in less than a moment, he seemed to grow older.

"Would you come outside for a minute?" he said.

Digger nodded.

Weems set the youngster on the floor. "Be a good girl and get your bags ready while daddy goes outside and talks to this gentleman," he said.

"They're all ready, daddy," she said.

Weems smiled at her. He turned, and went out the door. Digger followed him. Angel Marks and Ted Shaw and Miss Carter tried to follow the detective.

"Stay here!" Digger said.

They obeyed him. His voice had the snap of a whip in it. Mrs. Muller stared from one to the other with wondering eyes.

CHAPTER VII

WEEMS was a dark shadow standing beside his car.

"Ten thousand," he said.

"No," Digger said.

Night had fallen. The big elms were dark shadows in the night. From the

back porch of the old brick building voices called to the children to come to study hall and to prayers. The high laughter in the big yard was dying down. The games had stopped. The call was now to study hall and to prayers. And then to bed.

"Twenty thousand," Weems said. "There was no kidnapping. I took my own youngster—"

"There was a body in the horse weeds," Digger said.

"I got it from an undertaker," Weems said. "The child was already dead. I told them I was a medical student and that I needed the body for research. The parents were poor. A hundred dollars looked big to them."

"Oh," Digger said. "Then the clothes and the ring—"

"I put Gee Gee's clothes and ring on that body," Weems said. "I bought a pair of women's slacks and a pair of women's shoes. I have small feet, you know, and a small body. I made certain the slacks were snagged on a nail on the ladder and that the prints of a woman's shoes were in the garden—"

"Why?" Digger said. The night was still. A car stopped out in front.

"I wanted a divorce," Weems said. "I also wanted my child. My wife would give me neither."

His voice was raspy, harsh with strain.

"I loved my baby. I still love her. I couldn't live without her. So—I kidnapped her."

"Knowing the shock would push your wife over the ragged edge?" Digger said. "Knowing she would have a breakdown and you could pack her off to an insane asylum. Then you could have Miss Carter and you could have Gee Gee. You could wait a respectable time and go off someplace else to live—"

"Something like that," Weems said.

"Twenty thousand."

"It must have been a shock to you, just as you were getting ready to leave, when Tessie Wright came to you and said she had located your baby—"

"It—I never saw her in my life."

"You're a liar. She saw Gee Gee's picture in the detective story magazine. She finally doped out who the Thompson youngster really was. She knew you as Thompson. She thought you had kidnapped the Weems baby. She went to the big city and looked up Robert Weems to tell him where his baby was. It must have been a hell of a jolt to her when she discovered that Mr. Thompson and Mr. Weems were one and the same person. A hell of a jolt."

"Thirty thousand," Weems said. "I never saw the woman in my life. I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't. She came to see you and you knew you had to act. A woman's clothes had worked once for you. Why not twice? You put on a woman's suit, hat, gloves, veil, and went to call on her. You throttled her."

Weems was getting shakier and shakier. "I did not such thing. You'll never prove it. Just as you'll never prove I actually kidnapped Gee Gee, if I don't want you to. I can say the child was recovered unharmed two years ago. In order to avoid publicity, I put her in an orphanage. If I stick to that story through thick and thin, nobody will ever prove I'm not telling the truth."

"You were burning those clothes in the fireplace the night I came to see you," Digger said. "You thought I knew too much. Then, after I left, your wife came blundering in. You knew she was crazy. You told her I was the person who had kidnapped Gee Gee. You gave her a gun and told her where she could find me, knowing that

she would go looking for me. You would be rid of me—”

“Forty thousand,” Weems whispered huskily.

“I’ll take it, pal,” Mac said. “Tessie told me more than she knew she was telling me and I’ve been on your trail ever since. I’ll take that forty grand. And you, shamus, get your hands up!”

MAC, the little bald-headed man from the hotel.

Digger felt the muzzle of the gun dig into his backbone.

He dropped flat on the ground. Letting every muscle sag at the same time, he fell flat and rolled as he hit.

Above him the gun thundered as Mac pulled the trigger.

Digger shot up. The gun jumped in his hand. And jumped and jumped. He was lying on his back. He pumped lead upward.

Mac tried to shoot down at him. And tried and tried. He took one step forward, tripped over Digger’s feet, and began to fall.

He lit on top of Digger.

The detective shoved him off, stumbled to his feet.

The back door of the small house burst open. Angel and Ted came running out.

“John!” Angel called. “John.”

“Get back inside,” Digger said. “He may have had somebody else with him. Get back inside and keep Gee Gee in there with you.”

Gee Gee was trying to get out the back door. Angel and Mrs. Muller caught her.

“All right, Weems,” Digger said. “This is the end of it.”

Weems was leaning against his car. He hadn’t moved during the shooting. Mac’s body lay at his feet but still he didn’t move.

“You’re right,” he said. “This is

the end of it. And I’m not sorry it ended this way, not sorry at all.”

He sounded choked.

“I loved the kid,” he whispered. “I really loved her. And I don’t want her to know—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The shot he fired,” Weems nodded toward the body on the ground. “That shot hit me. My will is made. Gee Gee is the sole beneficiary.”

“What?”

“I’m not sorry it ended this way,” Weems whispered. “I’m glad. I’m really glad—Being alive wasn’t much fun. Not ever. I’m glad—I’m really glad—”

He sagged.

He tried to hold himself up by the door handle. He didn’t have enough strength. He sagged, slid forward, so that his body lay across the body of the little baldheaded man.

Digger looked at them. They were two small splotches of darker shadow in the shadow of the great elms. He slipped the gun back into its holster, walked toward the small house.

“Where’s my daddy,” Gee Gee wailed. “Where’s my daddy?”

“He’s gone away,” Digger said. “He’s gone far away.”

His voice was choked, a wry and wretched sound.

THE newspapers gave it headlines.

WEEMS BABY FOUND ALIVE

Kidnapped by father, hidden in orphanage

Ted Shaw had written his heart out on this story. He had turned loose all the words, pulled all the stops. He had put Digger’s name in the lead, Digger’s
(Concluded on page 177)

Bad Blood

by Paul Fairman



"Here's my badge," he said. "I'll be around when I'm ready to wear it again"

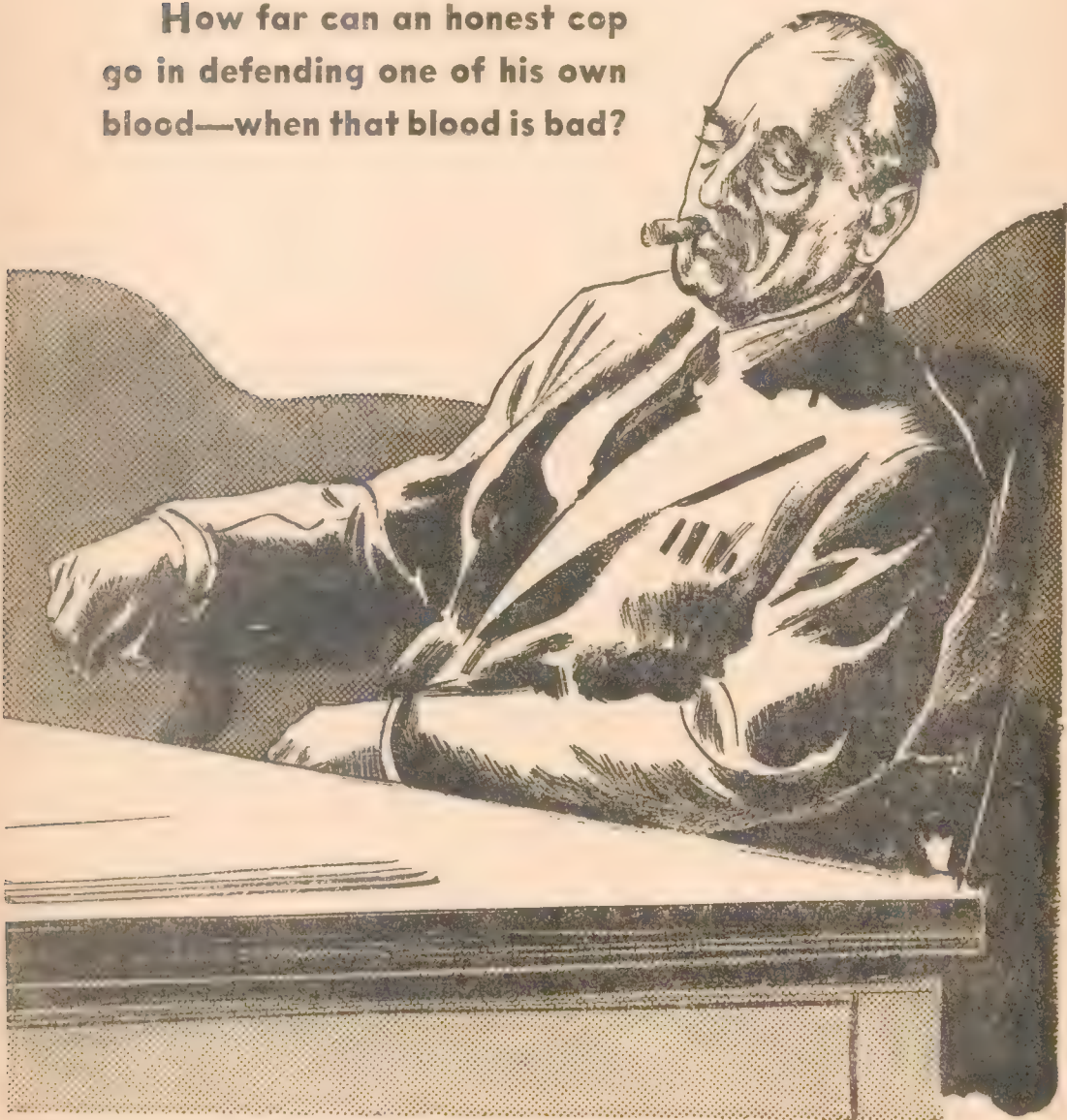
THE young man in the light gray topcoat appeared to be waiting for someone. He had been waiting a long time—through late afternoon and into early evening—in front of the Crest Hotel on Lake Shore Drive. He had smoked a lot of cigarettes and flipped the butts in long arcs toward the curb, where a blue Pontiac coupe also waited for someone.

The young man surveyed the urban

scene with a casual disinterest as phony as the paper moon they wrote a song about. He propped a shoulder against the wall of the hotel and regarded the labors of a little girl who was tooling a bicycle back and forth along the sidewalk. A bicycle three sizes too large for her short legs. Each time the hotel door opened, the young man looked up, only to look away again when it closed.

The little girl tumbled off the bicycle

**How far can an honest cop
go in defending one of his own
blood—when that blood is bad?**



for perhaps the tenth time, when the hotel door opened for perhaps the fiftieth. The young man, as usual, covered it with his eyes. This time, he kept on looking.

A man was coming out; a fat man, in a hurry, with a black cigar in his mouth. The young man crouched very carefully, balancing himself on the balls of his feet. He jerked at the brim of his hat.

Then the fat man crossed the sidewalk, fumbling for his keys, the little girl climbed back on her bicycle, and the young man took a black automatic pistol from his pocket and shot the fat man three times in the back.

The fat man's mouth went slack. His knees weakened and he collapsed like a punctured balloon. He clawed lovingly at the side of the car as he went down. The black cigar left a streak of ashes on his white shirt, as it fell into the gutter.

The rest happened very quickly. The young man, backing away, turned at the corner of the hotel and was tripped by a woman coming around the same corner with an armload of bundles.

The woman stumbled. The young man teetered. They went down together. The young man cursed, and the black automatic spoke again.

It was a vagrant, accidental shot. The woman screamed.

While the woman scrabbled insanely for rolling apples, the young man found his feet. He pocketed the gun, leaped over the woman, and ran down the alley. He disappeared into the gloom of brick walls and closely packed buildings.

The woman kept on screaming. The high pitched monotone seemed to pull people up out of the sidewalk, and there was a crowd. Everything became action and movement.

But the little girl neither screamed

nor moved. She lay beside her bicycle, in a pool of bright blood. The blood came from a hole in her neck. The front wheel of the bicycle spun to a slow stop.

LARRY CUNNINGHAM returned to the station late the following afternoon. He had to go back sometime. He couldn't keep on walking forever. Besides, walking wasn't doing much good. This pounding the pavement, up one street and down the other—watching ten years of hard work melt into a rainy afternoon.

A gray-haired sergeant named Fenner was on the desk when Larry went in. Fenner had big, sad eyes, and a face that hadn't been cracked by a smile in forty years. He raised his head and tried to act as though nothing had happened and said, "Hi fella. Phone call."

He took a slip of paper from the desk and creased it with a large thumb-nail. He scowled and looked the way a man looks who thinks he should say something and doesn't want to.

"Look, Larry," he said. "Maybe it isn't so bad. What the hell have they got, anyway? Some dizzy broad that claims the guy had red hair. Nuts! The town is lousy with redheads that know how to use a gun."

There was no humor in Larry's thin smile. "This one *didn't* know how to use a gun. That's what's bad about it."

"Any number of guys could have been after Polichek."

Larry's mouth straightened. He said, "Thanks, Fenner," and took the slip of paper and read the scrawl across its surface. He crossed the room and sat down at another desk in front of a telephone, and stared at the wall for a minute. Then he dialed a number and waited.

While the phone rang at the other

end, Larry turned and called to Fenner. "The little girl. Any word?"

Fenner scowled again. "Nothing new. They're afraid to probe for the slug and they're afraid not to. It doesn't look so good."

Larry Cunningham doubled a slow fist and pressed it down hard against the desk top. Then the phone stopped ringing and a feminine voice came over the wire. Larry pushed his hat back. He said, "I'm at the station, Phyllis. I just got your call."

Phyllis Whelan's voice did something to Larry's stomach. Something that that felt like butterflies. "Hmmm," she said. "So it's plain Phyllis now. Who pushed me out of your life, my pet?"

"A cute trick from Lincoln Avenue."

"I'll bet I can lick her."

"She's a sucker for a left. Anything on your mind?"

"Harry Richman at the Chez Paree, or so I've been told. Of course I'm hard to get, but I can be coaxed. By the way, you sound as though the bottom had dropped out of your world."

"A couple of little things," Larry answered. "You must have skipped the morning papers."

"Did I miss anything?"

"A killing over on the drive. A character named Fats Polichek, one of Scarozzi's boys, took three in the back while he was climbing into his car in front of the Crest Hotel."

"That's too bad. Did he have an apartment by any chance? We'll be needing one."

"I'll check on that."

"Darling, crime is crime, but don't let it get you. Laugh and be happy—as some goon so aptly put it."

"There's more, angel," Larry returned, dully. "A little girl—a tyke around ten—was riding past on a bicycle. The gunman went trigger-happy

and put a bullet in her neck. She isn't expected to live."

THERE was a moment of silence before Phyllis Whelan said, "So they're killing babies in the street now." The light tone was gone from her voice.

"That's the slant, but lend an ear. It gets good. The gunman did his work while a woman was coming around the corner with some groceries. He bumped her during the getaway and knocked her down. His hat fell off and she got a good look at his face. She's practically identified him—from a picture."

"And—?"

Larry Cunningham's voice went low and lifeless. "He was around twenty-five, with red hair and a thin pale face. There was a scar on his hand—the left one."

"Oh Larry! No!"

"Yes. A two bit mobster from the West Side named Joe Cunningham—my sweet little kid brother."

Some more time ticked by. Fenner rattled a paper. Phyllis Whelan's voice came back. Her words were small drops of fear, trickling over the wire.

"When can I see you, darling? Where?"

Larry slowly rolled the white knuckles of his fist around the desk top. He said, "What's the use of kidding ourselves, Phyl. Let's be smart. This finishes us and we both know it."

There was a moment of silence thick enough to chew, before Phyllis Whelan said, "Wait a minute sonny boy. Aren't you a little fast on the uptake? I'm used to making up my own mind about things like that."

"Your dad will name the turn on this one, angel. As you'll recall he never was very hot about a gumshoe for a son-in-law. He has ambitions for his daughter. Big ones. Do you mean to stand there in your little number threes

and tell me he'll let you tie up with a baby killer's brother?"

"This is all very strange. You never talked like an idiot before—"

"John Whelan wants to be governor." Larry went on, "He's moving toward the chair pretty fast. After that—God knows. He'll see me stoking a boiler in hell before he let's me louse up that picture."

"Darling, I asked where I could see you."

Larry Cunningham fished a cigarette from the pack in his coat pocket. He examined it carefully and then rolled it into a ball and threw it on the floor. He took a deep breath and said, "Make it Jack's Bar at eleven thirty. I've got some things to do."

He hung the phone up and went back to the desk.

Fenner had a pen in his hand. He was making some hen tracks on the blotter, that someone would have to erase later on. He laid the pen down and made an unsuccessful attempt at nonchalance. He said, "By the way, Larry, the chief wants to see you. He stayed down."

Larry's grin was a brittle coat of ice over his face. "Probably collecting badges. I'll go up and make a donation."

Larry went out and got on the elevator and started up toward the fourth floor. Fenner watched him go. Fenner wasn't very happy.

AS THE elevator climbed, Larry's memory dropped back through the years to Holy Angel's hospital, out in old St. Malcahy's parish. It stopped just as the moment Father Tom was telling him: "It's cancer, son. Nasty stuff. Fast. We didn't lie to her and that way it's better. You can go in and see her now."

Father Tom wasn't like a lot of

priests. He didn't say anything about it's being the Lord's will. He thought it was a damned shame and he said so.

Larry had gone in to see his mother then. She looked small and white in the big bed. All she had said was, "You've got to take care of him, Larry," and Larry Cunningham knew she meant Joe. "He isn't bad—just unstable. He needs a guiding hand. He isn't like you are—or like your father was—steady, dependable. He never quite grew up. You must watch him. He's your responsibility."

Joe Cunningham had made a point of coming to see his mother, when they told him. He had gotten there half an hour after she was dead.

The elevator jerked to a stop at the fourth floor. The operator, an old pay-roller with a red nose, jockeyed it to floor level. Larry Cunningham stepped out. His gray eyes were flat and bitter. Larry the strong one. His brother's keeper.

"You sure did a hell of a job, pal," he said, softly. He took a cigarette from his pocket and walked five miles down the hall to a door marked:

CARNEY REGAN

And underneath, in smaller letters:

Chief of Detectives

He put his hand on the knob and dropped the cigarette back into his pocket. He pushed the door open, went inside.

CARNEY REGAN was big, from the soles of his enormous feet to the top of his tub of a gray head. His chin said that he was tough. His eyes claimed that he was basically honest. A lot of years were reflected in his face. With water in its creases, you

could have floated a canoe.

Larry Cunningham crossed the room and stood in front of his desk. He waited, saying nothing.

After a while, Carney Regan got through being busy and raised his eyes. They held a tired look. He said, "Seems as though Joey sort of threw a shoe, eh, son?"

"That's a way of putting it," Larry answered.

"Been around with him much lately?"

"Some. He's hard to catch up with."

Regan smiled swiftly. "Let's hope Nick Scarozzi finds it that way."

Larry Cunningham didn't answer. He put the heels of his hands on the edge of Regan's desk and leaned against them. After a moment of thought, Regan went on.

"I've known you since you wore knee pants, Larry. I was around when you went on the cops. I remember shaking your hand."

Larry remembered too. His hand had been sore for a week afterward.

"Your dad was proud of that day."

Regan picked a pencil from the desk and began tapping the rubbered end on the glass. His dark eyes looked through the wall, out into the street, and beyond.

"A great guy, Mike Cunningham. I pounded beats with him, out back of the yards, in the old days. I was the first one to get to him the night some drunken jig slid a knife into his back. A copper to the finish, was Mike. He died crawling down the sidewalk after the killer."

Larry Cunningham's neck felt thick under his collar. "Did you call me up here to tell me that?"

Carney Regan didn't ruffle any. He pondered for a moment. "Yeah—I guess I did, and I'm thinking that I'm glad Mike Cunningham's gone—that he

isn't here to see this day."

"Is that all?"

"That's all—I guess."

Larry turned and recrossed the office. He opened the door.

"That," Regan called, "and something else; something I'm damned sure of. I think if your dad were here today, he'd bring in any killer he could lay his hands on—even if it happened to be his own son."

Larry Cunningham closed the door and walked stiffly down the hall.

TEN P. M. The rain still came down; a steady drive of little cold pellets out of a black sky. The weather matched Larry Cunningham's mood, as he drove west on Washington Boulevard, his fingers hooked loosely on the lower half of the steering wheel. As the street unrolled, he kept glancing up into the mirror over the windshield, the way you do at a door, for someone late for an appointment. Ten blocks on west he identified what he was looking for.

It was a small black sedan with a dim left headlight. It had been glued to his rear bumper too long to leave any doubt. Ten blocks more, and he knew he was going to have a time being alone. The little one eyed car had been well trained. It knew its way around.

Larry drove another half mile and pulled over to the curb. He locked his Dodge coupe and took to the sidewalk, continuing on. The rain, sifting in under his hat brim, felt good on his face. He liked the rain.

So did a thin, shiny coated figure trailing fifty yards in his wake. The man held the distance so accurately that Larry Cunningham could have been pulling him along with unseen ropes.

Larry made three separate attempts to get clear. No success. The tail had

plenty of time and he seemed to like playing games.

Finally Larry Cunningham selected an areaway—a narrow space ahead between two buildings. He came abreast of it, faded back inside, and stood close to the near wall.

The tail, sloshing amiably along, increased his speed. Larry waited until the sound of footsteps became loud enough. Then he stopped out and smashed bodily into the rain-coated tail.

The man's face glowed whitely in the gloom. He had a sharp pointed chin. Larry Cunningham slapped three knuckles against the chin and heard teeth crack together.

Larry moved in, keeping the man off balance. The thin man back-pedaled, gasped and wanted to know what the hell. Larry didn't bother to tell him. He stamped a heel on the man's in-step and pushed.

The thin man waved one hand in the air and reached toward his hip pocket with the other. Larry slugged the third button of his rain coat, and the man forgot the gun in his pocket and got busy holding his stomach. He held it until he tripped over the edge of the walk and went down, full length, into the racing gutter. He lay there, looking up out of venomous black eyes.

Larry Cunningham stared down at his bleakly. "Tell Nick Scarozzi I'm in no mood," Larry said. "Tell him to do his own hunting and quit depending on me. I might get mad next time." He turned away and walked on down the block. At the corner he looked back. The thin man was pulling himself up out of the gutter.

LARRY CUNNINGHAM turned off the boulevard a few blocks further west, and moved into one of those seedy neighborhoods that always skirt the better sections of a city like the frayed

edges of a garment. It was the abode of the transient brotherhood; the restless people—who never sign leases and never leave a trail.

He walked until he came to a yellow apartment building of a slightly better appearance than its neighbors. The building had a cringing look, like a solid citizen caught in the red light district. Larry glanced up and down the street, passed the first of two doorways and faded from sight through the second.

The lobby had been painted in one solid color—the yellow of an overripe egg—so the decorators wouldn't have to mix different kinds of paint. It cut expenses. The stairs were carpeted in dark red.

Larry Cunningham climbed two flights of them and walked down a long, quiet hall. Cigarettes had been thrown on the floor and stepped on. Cigarettes had been thrown on the floor and not stepped on. But the landlord could still laugh. The carpeting was asbestos.

At a door marked 309, Cunningham stopped and pushed his hat back. He put his ear to the panel. No sound. He tapped it lightly with the knuckles of his left hand. The stillness got thicker. He rapped harder and waited. Nothing happened. He took a ring of keys from his pocket, thoughtfully selected one. He put his lips close to the panel and said, "I'm coming in Joe." He unlocked the door and went inside and closed it behind him.

The place was like ten thousand other kitchenettes around town. It was sparsely equipped in an economy of space, the sink and stove behind one double door, the bed behind another. The furnishings were the kind you buy in any second rate used furniture store. The walls were in a pastel shade of yellow. But this one had something you couldn't go out and buy—a young man

standing in the middle of the room with a .45 automatic in his hand.

The automatic was turned on Larry Cunningham's belt buckle. Larry stood still, his hands in the pockets of his top coat. He looked steadily at his brother.

Joe Cunningham had carrot red hair, uncombed. It split down the middle and hung to his ears on either side. A red two day bristle extended down his thin jaws, and covered a sharp chin, framing a weak, slightly twisted mouth. His eyes were light blue, the whites bloodshot from lack of sleep. He wore a faded blue shirt, opened at the neck, the right side hanging out of unpressed brown slacks. He needed a shine.

Larry Cunningham took one hand from his pocket and rubbed it slowly along the edge of his jaw. He was remembering again:

A Sunday—a Sunday a thousand years back—when he sat between his mother and father in St. Malcahy's church, and watched a couple of dozen Botticelli angels march up the aisle toward the altar. He remembered the soft look in his mother's face when Joey walked solemnly by carrying a yellow candle on that confirmation day. Mom's and Dad's hands had met along the pew behind Larry. There was something golden in that memory.

LARRY CUNNINGHAM moved slowly forward, toward his brother. There was a flat, sick look around his mouth. He said, "Put the gun down, Joey, or I'll beat your rotten brains out with it."

Joe Cunningham didn't move. His fingers worked nervously. His lips came back, showing a set of even white teeth. "You're not taking me in copper, I'll blow a hole straight through your belly. And I ain't kidding."

Larry's face went deadpan. "Not in the belly. In the back, maybe, or rid-

ing a bicycle."

Joey's mouth snarled. "That was an accident. You know damn well I didn't shoot the kid on purpose."

"So do a hundred million other people. Everybody with a radio knows all about you, Joey. You're a very unpopular guy tonight, and from now on."

Joe Cunningham said, "Stand back! How the hell did you know I was here, anyway?"

Larry kept on coming. "Simple. You haven't got the brains to go anywhere else. You'd stay here until the law came after you or Nick Scarozzi evened things up with a Tommy gun."

Joe Cunningham's eyes widened and his voice went a little high.

"I ain't kidding, I told you. Don't come at me. I don't like guys coming at me."

Larry took two more steps and reached out, slowly. He wrapped a hand around the barrel of the .45 and turned it toward the ceiling. He slammed the open palm of his other hand against the side of his brother's face. The sound was like a dull pistol shot.

Joe Cunningham forgot the gun and staggered back. He regained his balance, gave out a short, strangled scream, and leaped—all in one piece—at Larry, like a cat diving at a tree trunk.

Larry caught him, lazily, by the front of his shirt, and held him hard for a moment. Then he shoved, savagely. Joe Cunningham went backward, across the room. He hit the lounge with the backs of his knees, and collapsed on the cushions. He crouched there.

Larry looked at the automatic, turned it over in his hand, tossed it into a corner of the room. "Who put you on Fats Polichek?" he asked.

Joe Cunningham grinned crookedly. "Always the copper. Always snooping

around. Fats had on a red necktie. I don't like red neckties. I plugged him."

"Don't answer like that when they put you under the lights," Larry returned, dully. "Some cop'll slap you through the wall."

Joe Cunningham said, "Nuts!"

Larry's face suddenly changed, as though it had been ripped and twisted by the slash of a whip. When he spoke, his voice was a cry in his throat.

"Why the hell couldn't you stick to your penny ante rackets? What was wrong with the slot machines and the horses and the two bit poker games? Why did you have to take a gun and go out and kill somebody? I had money if you needed it."

Joe sneered comfortably. "You and your kind of dough make me sick. Go ram your preaching down somebody else's throat."

For a moment Larry stood perfectly still, his hands tight at his sides. Then he turned and walked out of the drab kitchenette apartment, down into the street. He walked to the boulevard and hailed a cab; rode east, picked up his car and drove to Jack's Bar on Madison Street.

PHYLLIS WHELAN was waiting at a small table at the end farthest from the juke box. She had on a light tan, tailored coat, that spoke about money, well spent. Honey colored hair frothed down from under a brown felt hat, hiding the back of her collar. As Larry walked over, she turned a healthy brown face his way. A pair of large, wide-set eyes completed the brown study. As Larry dropped into the chromium chair opposite her, he wondered if he had liked brown before meeting Phyllis Whelan. He couldn't remember. He said,

"Sorry I'm late. Wet weather."

"I ordered for you—scotch," she returned. "I made it a double. A nice night for a double."

He picked up the oversize shot glass and poured half of it down. The burn in his throat felt good. He set the glass down, and Phyllis Whelan said,

"And now to business. There was some babbling over the phone I wanted to ask you about. I'd almost swear you said we were washed up, or words to that effect. Maybe I'd better have my ears checked."

Larry Cunningham looked at Phyllis Whelan's small red mouth. His look traveled slowly up the line of her straight nose and stopped at her eyes.

"At the risk of sounding like a broken record," he returned, "I'll go over it again. Point one: I'm just a guy on the cops, with no great future in sight. That, in itself, never sat very well with John Whelan. Two: I now have a very famous brother; a kid known from coast to coast. Women will be talking about him at club meetings, and, all over the country, law men are tightening up their belts and saying, 'It won't happen here.' Before long they'll take Joey and burn his pants in the electric chair, and all those people will be very happy."

Larry finished his scotch, set the glass down.

"Do you and I make any sense together after that, baby?"

Phyllis Whelan looked back at him, levelly.

"I'll go on from there," she said. "Point Three: I met a mug named Cunningham and fell for him. I pitched myself at his head, with more or less success, for quite some time. I'll keep right on pitching until the desired effect is achieved." She lowered her eyes and looked down into her bourbon and Coke as though there were a dime in it she planned to fish out.

"You make sense," Larry returned dully. "Then your dad will be able to tell someone: 'This is my son-in-law, Larry Cunningham. You've heard of the Cunninghams. Larry's brother shot a few people and they fried him like an egg. Quite a card, Joey was.' Angel, can you see your dad holding still for that?" Larry asked, softly.

THE troubled look in Phyllis Whelan's eyes ran over and spilled down her smooth face. "Dad *has* worried me lately. He's become—remote, somehow. I can't quite explain it. I'm not in his life the way I'd like to be."

"John Whelan is big. He has something other men don't possess. Color, personality—something. He's headed for the governor's chair. That will be a cinch. After that, God knows."

There was a moment of glass turning, and Phyllis Whelan said, "I had some time tonight. I dropped in to see Father Tom. He asked about you. Why don't you go over there?"

"Father Tom's got no answer to this one, angel. It's out of his territory."

"Are you sure?"

Larry's voice got savage.

"Look, I'm a cop. I get paid for upholding what's laughingly called the law. They give me good money to go out and get people who kill other people." Larry made a light cross with his forefinger on the back of Phyllis Whelan's hand.

"And," he finished, "it's not supposed to make any difference if the killer happens to be my brother. The other party is just as dead."

"Did Regan send you after Joey?"

"Not in so many words."

"But you know where he is."

Larry nodded and looked at the line where Phyllis' hair swept down along her neck and went into curls. "That's it. I was out there tonight. It's the

old place we used to have together. I went out to bring him in. I lost my nerve."

Phyllis Whelan searched for some words and couldn't find them.

"It's—it's rotten!" she said, finally.

Larry Cunningham folded the scotch glass into his palm, unfolded it and set it down. He got swiftly to his feet, put on his hat and grinned, without humor.

"Maybe I just needed a drink," he said.

Phyllis Whelan looked up, startled.

"Take care of yourself, angel," Larry said, and started toward the door.

The girl watched him go. Her lips formed a word she didn't say. She looked at Larry Cunningham's broad back until it disappeared. Then she stared at the revolving door until it disappeared. Then she stared at the revolving door until it stopped spinning.

THE yellow apartment building hadn't changed any. It still looked ashamed. The hall carpet was red as ever, and the same cigarette butts still littered the floor.

Larry Cunningham climbed the stairs slowly. When he got to the third floor, he knew exactly how many steps there were. Forty eight, not counting the landings. He walked down the hall again, and stopped in front of 309 and looked at the numbers for a while. They were brass, stamped out of large sheet in somebody's factory. Larry took his keys out and thought about the people who stamp out numbers all day and then go home and come back to do the same thing over again. Lucky people.

He unlocked the door and went inside.

Joe Cunningham sat on the lounge in almost the same spot as before, but the

red stubble was gone and he had put the pale blue shirt tail inside his trousers.

Larry set his back against the door. The palms of his hands, flat against the panel, were cold and wet. His eyes were gray marbles in cold, dead slits.

Joe Cunningham snarled, "What the hell is this? Grand Central Depot?"

"I'm taking you in, Joe," Larry said. He watched his brother's face, saw it change. The sneer faded. Joe Cunningham looked like a man who had just had a straight flush beaten by another straight flush, one card higher. Larry took his hands off the door and moved toward the lounge.

Joe Cunningham tightened. His shoulders twisted, and his hand crept toward the .45 lying on the cushion beside him.

Larry kept on coming. He said, "Don't do it, Joe, or you'll go in horizontal. I could drill you five times before you touch it. That's no good, Joey. The state likes to do it their way."

Joey hesitated a split second. Larry took two quick steps and had his brother by the collar. He lifted him away from the gun. Joe Cunningham squirmed and beat out harmlessly with his fists, like a school boy in his first fight.

"You're a yellow rat!" he screamed, through set teeth. "Turning your own brother in. Rats do things like that. Fats Polichek had it coming."

"The little girl didn't have it coming."

"For Christ's sake! Give me some kind of a deal. I could have plugged you twice tonight."

Larry Cunningham didn't say anything. He stood there, holding Joe, clenched his free fist until the fingers ached.

Joe struggled, reached back toward the gun. Color flooded his face. He

poured out a string of four letter words.

Larry opened his hand and slapped hard at some of the words. He left white streaks across Joe's cheeks and mouth. He said, "Cut it out," in a tight, strangled voice. "It won't do any good. We're going in. I'm a copper—remember? Coppers don't like baby killers. We have a lot of fun doing this to them."

He slapped Joe again—hard.

THE second slap could easily have been the cue for the door to cave in. The sound of splitting wood came a second after the sting went through Larry's hand. Someone was throwing a lot of weight against the panel, from the outside.

The door didn't give on the first smash. The hinges groaned, and a slice of fresh pine appeared in the panel. The opening was large enough to let in a string of curses. The cursing started in where Joe Cunningham had stopped.

Larry dropped Joe back on the lounge and dived for the .45. He scooped it up as he went around the corner of the lounge. As he hit the carpet, the door split from top to bottom. It hung crazily on bent hinges and splinters.

Joe Cunningham moved across the room like a panicky animal. He moved in a straight line until he came to the wall. He hit it full force, slid to his knees, and tried to burrow into the woodwork. His throat and lips worked. Only strangled moans came out.

Larry crouched on one knee at the end of the lounge, cuddling the .45 in his palm. The door flew open and three men tried to crowd in at once. Larry raised the automatic, carefully.

The first man to make it was thin, white-faced. He wore a wet hat and a slick, black raincoat, and he carried an odd, slant-butted gun that looked

something like a German Lueger. As Larry fired, he wondered where you found shells for a gun like that.

The man got out three words: "There's the bastard!" before the .45 roared a welcome. Then he stopped talking and went crosseyed, looking down into the big red hole where the middle of his face had been. He climbed up on his toes and came on across the room, like a ballet dancer tripping over invisible wires. When he fell, it was straight forward, with a crash that shook the furniture.

Larry didn't see him fall. He was busy snapping a shot at the second man, a dapper little fellow with a carnation in his button hole and a nice crease in his pants.

The pretty torpedo rushed into the room, full of business, carrying a cute little gun, all chromium and ivory. Once inside, he hesitated, as though he had suddenly decided that he didn't want to die.

It was too late. He was already dead. He coughed delicately, dropped the gun, and went limber-legged as he fell. He didn't move after that.

The third invader was almost as large as the space he came through. He had a dark, olive face. An old knife wound crawled up the side of his face and disappeared under his hat. His eyes were black bayonets, slicing across the room at Joe Cunningham. Some of the swarthiness in his face was livid, unreasoning rage.

Joe Cunningham reached down into his throat and brought up a word. He screamed it:

"Carozzi!"

The big mobster raised a shiny, nickle plated revolver, while Joe Cunningham buried his head in his arms. He grinned.

He lowered the gun again, as Larry Cunningham put five slugs into the left

lapel of his two hundred dollar overcoat.

CAROZZI lived for a while on his nerve. He shuddered at the first impact of the bullets, and looked surprised. He had not even seen Larry Cunningham. He looked around, stupidly. His fall was in slow motion. As he went down, he tried, doggedly to raise the gun again, to point it at Joe Cunningham.

Larry watched him. Putting any more lead in Carozzi's big body seemed pointless.

As Carozzi struggled silently, Joe Cunningham jumped to his feet and began moving. He moved toward Carozzi, over him and out the door. He moved down the hall, down the steps, and into the street. He kept moving until he fell, exhausted.

Carozzi's knees hit the floor. He tipped forward, a Mohammedan at prayer. Larry Cunningham got up and went over and touched the gangster with a toe. Carozzi rolled over and lay looking like a dead man should look.

Larry blew absently into the barrel of the .45. Acrid smoke billowed lazily around the room. Larry went to the door and looked out. All was quiet, well ordered, serene. The tenants of the yellow building had learned the value of minding their own business.

Larry turned back, looked down at Carozzi. "Three came a hunting," he mused, "and didn't fire a shot." He walked over to the telephone, picked it up, waited.

"They had guts, anyhow—or they were plain damn fools," he said, softly. "Let me have the Detective Bureau, sister."

NIGHT-QUIET soaked through the walls of Carney Regan's office, permeated the room. Regan sat at his

desk, resting his big body on beamlike arms along its edge. He didn't look like a Chief of Detectives at three o'clock in the morning. He looked like an old man who belonged home in bed.

The clock snipped off another minute and tossed it negligently into eternity. Regan looked up sourly and went on thinking.

Larry Cunningham paced the floor. His walk was the measured tread of a tiger with no place to go. He stopped and looked out the window. The street lamps were dim. The street was asleep. He paced some more, until Regan slammed a fist on the desk and said,

"That's the way it's got to be. You're not in the picture at all. You were down in Chinatown eating opium. Anything. The gun was Joey's. Your brother has three more killings tied to his tail, that's all."

Larry walked over to the desk.

"How about the newspapers?"

"They'll ride along. They'll have to. They won't have anything else to go on."

"And Joey—when they bring him in?"

Regan's eyes got crafty.

"What makes you think they'll bring him in?"

"In shape to talk you mean?"

"Look, if ever a guy had thirteen strikes on him, your brother is the guy."

Larry Cunningham pushed a hand through his hair. "As long as this is Questions and Answers, how about this one? Why not tell them the truth?"

"And have them blast out about how a cop from the Bureau covered his no-good baby killer of a relative when he was supposed to be out hunting him down? Not by a damn sight!" Regan's voice crescendoed into a roar on the last words.

Larry put his hands on the desk and braced himself the way a man would

do it who was trying to keep from jumping over and strangling a man on the other side.

"I went out to get Joe," he said tightly. "I lost my nerve. I went back again. While I was in there, Carozzi and his two office boys came calling. What did you want me to do? Cut a cake?"

"And Joe got fed up with the color of the wallpaper and went apartment hunting."

Larry's voice stayed the same.

"Joe beat it. I could have brought him down with a slug. I didn't."

Carney's face split in two while he yawned.

"The newspaper boys won't believe it," he said flatly. "And I think they'd be chumps if they did. I don't believe it myself."

"I don't give four good whoops in hell what you believe. I was through the second Joe pulled that trigger. I know it and you know it."

Larry slid a hand under his left arm and came up with a Police Positive. He laid it on the desk. He took a wallet from his hip pocket, unpinned his badge, dropped it beside the gun.

"If you want to prefer charges I'll be home. You know where I live. Or do you want to throw me in the clink right now?"

Regan suddenly looked older and more tired than a man should get on any kind of a job. He doubled a fist that resembled a ham.

"Don't be silly," he said.

Larry Cunningham had a vein standing out on each side of his neck. His body was tight as the E string on a violin. He let himself out of Regan's office with as much noise as a second story man going after the family silver.

DOWN in the street, with soft rain on his face, Larry relaxed. He

shook visibly. A wave of nausea came and went. He walked to the Dodge, unlocked it, got in and started north. The change came as he drove through silent streets.

A sudden feeling of freedom. For years he had been living under a shaky roof, waiting for it to fall. Now it had fallen. It was over. Nothing else could happen. He could go on through, life carefree and gay. No doubt a man could get used to wearing a fallen roof around his neck. A man could get used to anything.

He felt giddy, light headed. He reached his apartment building, thirty blocks north, got out of the car, left it unlocked, and danced up the stairs on pink clouds.

He went inside and turned on lights everywhere. Larry Cunningham liked lots of light. He hesitated at the liquor cabinet. Dull, uninteresting stuff; went on into the bedroom, sat down on the bed, enwrapped in the odd ecstasy of an emotional bender. He lay back, arms outstretched.

Before the rim of his hat hit the spread, he was asleep.

THE incessant buzzing of the phone was like the nagging of a conscience, trapped in some far-off place. It beat against Larry's brain, found an opening, burrowed in.

Larry stirred and pawed blindly for the instrument, got it to his ear. He managed a salutary grunt, sat stupid, while the voice at the other end ripped away the mask of sleep.

He straightened up and said sharply, "Come again."

Phyllis Whelan answered, "Larry! Larry! It took so long! Hurry! They're in Dad's study and I'm deathly afraid. Someone's going to get killed, Larry."

He didn't hear anymore. The voice

of Phyllis Whelan talked on—to the bedspread—while Larry Cunningham gunned the motor of the Dodge down in the street.

The rubber screamed in pain, spun helplessly. The rain had turned into snow, and the wheels grabbed and threw the car down the street and into a sharp 45 degree turn, leaving long black lines as Larry pelted west.

Larry gripped the wheel and looked out at the dark world through narrowed eyes. A mirthless smile twisted his face. "So somebody's going to get killed," he muttered. "That would indeed be a novelty." He was normal again.

Alderman Whelan lived in an overgrown red brick house at the corner of Addison and Pine. The trip from Larry's apartment could have been made in twenty-five minutes. A crazy man, with luck, could have made it in fifteen. Larry's time measured twelve minutes. He was out of the car and up the steps while the Dodge rolled to a slow halt. A light was burning on the porch.

Phyllis Whelan opened the door. She had been waiting inside. She looked slim, boyish, fragile in the dim light of the hall. She wore green lounging pajamas. Her hair and lips were very dark, her face very white.

"I've been a fool, Larry. I've been blind," she said, but it was as if she were talking more to herself than to him. "It's all so clear now. I should have seen it a long time ago."

"Where are they?"

"In the study. Joe came to the back door. I let him in myself. He asked for father and they've been in the study for an hour. I guess I should have called you sooner—before they began fighting."

Larry's frown cut her off.

"The hall door is locked, but you

can go through the library—here.” She led him to a draped archway. “There’s a sliding door between the two rooms with no lock. Oh Larry—”

Larry said, “You stay here,” and walked away from her, into the library.

A muted light, in one corner filled the room with brooding shadows. The rich furnishings sneered at his presence. The sliding panel was closed. Larry approached it. He had spent a lot of time listening at doors lately, he thought.

He could hear voices now. Joe’s whine, shrill, sharp.

“I ain’t asking you for anything but what’s coming to me. I want my dough. I’ve got to have the dough to get off this merry-go-round!”

John Whelan’s voice was the patient pleading of a wise father.

He said, “Joe, listen to me. This can go on all night and we’ll get nowhere. I know what’s best for you—for both of us. I’ve made arrangements that will still work out, but you’ve got to follow my orders. I’ll protect you.”

“Protect me? You couldn’t cover up a kid stealing apples. Big shot! “—!” Carrozi’s getting too big. Brush out one of his boys and scare hell out of him. He was getting in your way. You’d see to it nobody could touch me. Now I couldn’t hide out in Dead End Iowa without the village idiot spotting me. I’ve got to get to Mexico and all I want from you is money to do it.”

“Everything would have been all right,” John Whelan said, “if you’d done what you were told. And you weren’t told to shoot a ten-year old child in the neck.”

“I want my money,” Joe screamed. “You promised it to me and I want it now.”

Whelan’s voice got a little sharper. “You seem to be in a rut, son. All this talk about money. Do you think I’m

going to turn you loose in this town with a roll in your pocket? You’d be picked up out of the first tavern you stumbled into.”

“Maybe you’d like to talk it over somewhere else,” Joe said. The scream was gone from his voice. It was suddenly low pitched, ominous. “The D. A.’s office maybe.”

THE silence that followed was like a film breaking at the climax of the picture. Nothing came through the door to Larry but the feeling of two men silently measuring each other in the room beyond. Then there was the sound of a quick gasp being pushed past someone’s teeth, and Joe Cunningham said,

“Stay away from me, Whelan. Don’t crowd me. I don’t like guys crowding me.”

A rush of moving feet, and Joe Cunningham moaning “Larry, Larry,” came next—and that was all.

In the split second he tore at the sliding panel, Larry Cunningham remembered that it had always been that way. On the streets and in the alleys of the West Side it had always been Joe going out and picking the fight, and, when he got in a tight spot, yelling for Larry. And Larry was always there. Here he was again when Joe called for him. Joe calling for his brother through instinct, like a rabbit diving for a bush.

Larry was in the room, and the room was filled with a red haze that came over his eyes when he saw Whelan’s broad back. Whelan wore a blue silk dressing gown. He was in a far corner of the study and the dressing gown was strained hard against his shoulders. His legs were far apart, bracing him. Between them, and below the bottom of the gown, Larry could see Joey’s feet. They were on tiptoe.

Whelan raised an arm, brought it down sharply. Again. The feet went flat on the carpet. Then Joe Cunningham's legs appeared, sagging horribly.

Whelan stepped backward, smoothly, like a cat. In his right hand was a paper knife. He looked distastefully at the blood dripping from the point and held the knife away from his body. He turned. John Whelan was a gray, handsome, powerful man.

Larry walked through the red haze. Whelan saw him, stopped tossing the knife away, drew it back close to his body. His face didn't change. There was no time to waste being surprised.

He stood squarely and said, "Careful Cunningham. You're heading for trouble."

Larry Cunningham didn't say anything.

WHEN Larry was close enough, Whelan feinted a left and slashed down with the knife. Larry ignored the feint. He caught Whelan's wrist, low against the heel of his hand. He looked dully into Whelan's eyes.

Whelan wrenched against Larry's grip. There was no give. Larry took two short steps and his body was behind Whelan's. He braced himself across Whelan's hips and pulled.

Whelan strained. He writhed and quick panic whipped into his face.

"It was self-defense, Larry. The boy wasn't himself. He came here and threatened me—" The knife dropped to the floor.

Larry's hands moved and were on Whelan's throat. They sank in until the nails were out of sight.

Whelan pulled backward, sharply, jerking Larry off balance. When Larry tried for a fresh foothold, there was none to be had. They went down together.

The sound of Whelan's head crack-

ing against the wall, hit the ceiling and echoed back.

Larry got slowly to his feet. He looked down at Whelan, jammed against the wall. Whelan's head was lying along his shoulder in a way no head could lie without a neck being broken. As Larry stared, the red haze cleared away.

He went over and stooped down over Joe and lifted him from the floor. There were two deep gashes under Joe's heart, blood soaked. Joe's head hung down loosely. Larry Cunningham carried him across the study, through the library and out into the hall.

Phyllis Whelan waited by the door.

"You're father is dead," Larry told her. "You'd better call the police."

She looked at Rick, expressionless. Her lips repeated the word, "dead," in a flat unemotional tone. But her eyes were unblinking pits of fear.

Larry said, "Open the door."

She walked over and obeyed, silently. As Larry passed her, Joe's hand brushed against her wrist. She raised her arm and stood looking dully at the place. Then she rubbed her other hand slowly across it.

Larry Cunningham walked down the stairs and stood on the sidewalk. The snow was a little heavier now. It padded solidly underfoot. It stuck, in small flakes to Joe's red hair hanging straight down toward the sidewalk. Larry wondered if it mattered what you did with a dead brother at four o'clock on a snowy morning.

He decided that it did. He took Joey over to the Dodge. Its wooden spoked wheels grinned at him as he approached. He put Joe inside, walked around and got behind the wheel and drove west.

ST. MALACHY'S church was an ancient heap of dirty stone, done in Gothic style. For fifty-five years, its

steeple had pointed silently toward the place it strove to remind people of. St. Malachy's was never closed. For fifty-five years, its doors had been open, twenty-four hours a day.

Larry stopped at the curb in front of the church, got Joe out of the car and carried him inside.

There was a great dimness inside the church. Only the votive lights cut the darkness, soothing it into a soft haze. The vigil light was a red spot before the altar.

Larry put his brother down in the last pew and braced him against the end board. Joey's head fell forward. Larry sat down beside him, smoothed back the wet red hair and flattened the pale blue collar around his throat. Larry wasn't particularly religious, but a swift thought went through his mind that Joey was in a better place than he had been for a long, long time.

When Larry left the church he went out without looking back.

He U turned the Dodge and rolled east along the lifeless boulevard. He wasn't tired anymore, nor elated, nor depressed, nor anything else. He felt flat and empty. There was no need to stop for anything, he thought. Just keep on driving. Joey had mentioned Mexico. Maybe one of the Cunninghams should put in an appearance there. But Mexico, Peru, Tibet; what the hell difference did it make?

The Dodge purred agreement.

Larry crossed three intersections before a red light got him. He pulled up, glided to a slow stop. As he waited, the lights of an all-night drug store yellowed the street corner. The light changed. Larry didn't move. It made two more changes. The third time it went green he was out of the car and inside the drug store.

He found the public phone, opened the book and picked out a number. He

fished a nickle from his pocket, dropped it in the slot and dialed. He waited. The phone rang for a long time.

The voice that answered was that of Carney Regan.

Larry said, "This is Little Sunshine with the latest. The score right up to date. In case you care, John Whelan was the man behind Joey." Regan was holding out on him and Joe went over to Whelan's house. I got a call from Phyllis and tagged along. There was an argument and Whelan killed Joey. I tackled Whelan and he fell against the wall and broke his neck, but it all adds up the same because I'd have killed him anyway. Now it's all washed up and I'm the only one left to pacify the taxpayers. Do you want to send somebody after me or shall I go down to the station?"

There was some cursing at the other end, then silence. Larry said. "You don't have to trace the number. I'll tell you where I am."

Regan answered, "For Christ's sake shut up a minute. Let a man think."

Larry let Regan think.

Finally Regan said. "Don't go to the station. Don't say anything to anyone. Come straight out to my house. I'll wait for you."

Larry hung up slowly. Deep in thought, he walked out of the drug store and got into the car. He turned north and drove for quite a while.

Carney Regan lived out where you could breath. He had a small white house on the far northern edge of the city in a block where there were only two other houses. The street had a very fancy name: Peekskill Drive, but it wasn't a drive, it was only a lane.

At the curb, in front of Regan's house, there was a cast iron colored boy in riding clothes. The colored boy was grinning. Larry wondered if that was because it had stopped snowing.

He parked, went up the walk and climbed the porch stairs. There were no lights inside. He reached for the bell.

Then someone dropped a piano through the porch roof. It hit Larry on top of the head. He lay down and went to sleep.

LARRY CUNNINGHAM woke up slowly. His ears awoke first. Someone was saying, "If the goddam jack had been there I'd a made it." Someone else grunted, "Nuts. You were through before you started."

Then his eyes opened. He was lying across his own bed, in his own bedroom. Through the door, he could see two men in their shirtsleeves. One wore a shoulder holster with a black rubber gun butt sticking out of it. They had pulled the coffee table out into the middle of the room and were sitting hunched over it. They were playing pinochle.

Larry got dizzily to his feet. He took two steps and grabbed for the door jam. His mouth tasted like a bag of rusty bolts. He said, "In case I'm not too inquisitive, who slugged and doped me?"

The two men looked up. One of them said, "Go back to sleep fella. I'm out four and a half bucks." Then, when he read Larry's look: "I've got your gun here, so don't get any ideas about getting rough."

The other man got up from the table and went to the phone. He dialed a number. When someone answered, he said, "He just woke up. What's next?"

He listened a while, hung up and motioned toward the door with his head. The other man got up and they both put on their coats. The one who had telephoned, a small, neatly built man in well pressed blue serge clothes, went over and picked Larry's coat off

the lounge and threw it to him.

"We're going to take a little trip," he said to Larry. "We're going down stairs and get into a car and I hope you'll be smart about it because we wouldn't like to have any trouble."

Larry thought he would probably be smart.

The loser went out first. Larry followed. The other brought up the rear. They walked downstairs in single file.

The blue serge man motioned Larry into the rear and got in after him. The loser drove. The car was a small black, inconspicuous Ford.

"What day is this?" Larry asked.

Blue Serge said, "It's getting along toward the end of the week." He kept a hand under the right side of his coat.

Larry said, "Thanks." After all, he didn't care what day it was. His head hurt too much.

After a while the car stopped in front of a building. They all got out and went inside and got on an elevator. The elevator went up to four. It stopped and they got out. Then they walked five miles to a door marked:

CARNEY REGAN

And, underneath, in smaller letters:

Chief of Detectives

THEY stopped in front of it. Blue Serge opened the door and motioned Larry inside. Larry went in. The two men didn't follow.

Carney Regan was sitting at his desk. He looked as though he hadn't moved in thirty years. He looked as though he had just sat there and grown old. He said, "Hello Larry. Come on over and sit down."

Larry walked over to the desk. He stood with his hands on the back of the chair Regan had indicated. He

waited.

After a moment of thought, Regan said,

"Let's talk about some things, son." He said it in a tired voice.

"What things?"

"Oh, democracy maybe, and city government, and things like that."

"Very interesting stuff. I learned about it in school."

Regan ignored that and went on, slowly.

"The people give us these jobs. That may sound funny, but they do. They vote us in and we fight like hell to stay in. God only knows why." Regan picked up a pencil and began tapping the desk. "It takes a rich country to afford a democratic government. They put us in and say 'Run the town,' and they know beforehand that we'll steal a little, but they don't care because they're rich—the richest nation that ever hit the face of the earth. In fact they kind of like the little graft, and they'd probably fight like the devil for their democratic right to get a ticket fixed or try to get their taxes chiseled down."

Regan stopped and thought, while Larry waited.

"But the big chisel—the big graft. That's a horse of another color," Regan droned on. "If a big graft breaks they'll slide us out of office so fast our pants will smoke for a week."

Regan laid the pencil down and spoke very slowly and distinctly.

"So that why we were all very glad to hear that John Whelan fell down the stairs, in his home, and broke his neck."

Larry took in a breath and stood silent under Regan's suddenly keen gaze.

"Regan was a party figure. He had what the people like to read about. But he was ambitious in the wrong way. He was playing some pretty nasty games

with some pretty nasty people. We'd known it for a long time, and we also knew that the Federal Government was about ready to move in on him. He made some mistakes about state lines. That will all die now, with Whelan, but it took some fast and fancy doing. I had you put out of the way a while because I had work to do, and you had to be out of sight."

"Is that the way you want it?"

"That's the way we want it," Regan answered. He reached into the drawer and brought out a gun and badge. "There they are. You can slip right back into the routine again."

Larry looked at Regan the way you look at someone who starts a joke you've heard fifty times. He said, "As you once told me, Regan—don't be silly."

He turned and went to the door. After he passed through it and closed it behind him, he never saw Carney Regan again.

After Larry was gone, Regan sat for a long time, looking at the gun and the badge.

LARRY was packed and ready to go.

He had one last thing to do now. He braked the Dodge in front of St. Malachy's rectory and went in to do it. A young priest answered the door. Larry asked for Father Tom. The priest led him to a small anteroom and asked him to wait.

Larry waited a long time. He didn't care, however. He had a lot of time to use up waiting.

After a while, there were soft steps and Phyllis Whelan came into the room.

She wore a dark brown suit, small brown pumps and carried a brown bag. Her face looked small, shrunken; her eyes very large.

"I tried to find you everywhere in town," she said. "This was my last

hope. I didn't think you'd leave without saying goodbye to Father Tom. I had his promise to call me."

She came over and stood very close to him. Larry wished she didn't look so damn cute. He said, "I'd probably have called you before I left."

"You still have the idea you're going away without me?"

"That's the way it's got to be." Larry felt hot. The words sounded corny and he knew it. "There isn't anything for us. I just the same as killed your father. There would be old ghosts standing between us from now on."

"That's your version."

"Why did you go along with the police?"

Color came into Phyllis Whelan's cheeks. "Why shouldn't I go along? Haven't enough people been killed? Doesn't the world know enough about our affairs? What help would it have been to do otherwise?" She paused.

"Let's take me first," Phyllis went on, evenly. "My dad had his own ideas of what he wanted to do. He didn't consult me. He didn't ask my advice. I'm not saying he wasn't good to me—

he was. But I've got a life to live and I know how I want to live it. Why should that be changed because father had the wrong idea of things."

She moved closer.

"And you. You had a brother who was full of bad blood. He was no good, and all your life it's been drilled into you that you were responsible for him. You weren't. And dad didn't kill Joe anymore than you killed my father. They both killed themselves."

Larry's face was expressionless.

"It's no good, Phyllis," he said.

She looked at him for a full minute, in silence. Then she smiled. The smile said she knew she hadn't sold anything.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"Miami. Pittsburgh. Los Angeles. Maybe they need a private dick in Detroit."

"Okay, go anywhere you want to—but don't be sure that I won't tag along."

Larry said, "Tell Father Tom I'll write him. So long, honey."

He went out and got into the Dodge. He drove away, wondering what time did to ghosts.

LEAD PICKUP

SURPRISINGLY often the solving of a baffling crime depends on the smallest detail. For instance, when bullets are found they are minutely examined for possible markings which might lead to identification or actual reconstruction of the crime. Lead bullets, particularly, re-

veal the slightest contacts. Any object touched, or even a bit of material torn by the bullet in its flight leave marks. There is one murder case on record that was solved primarily by markings of the victim's tooth found on the fatal bullet.

—A. Morris.

RODENT JURIST

THE next best thing to having a good lawyer to defend you in court is—a mouse! Take the case that came up recently in Chicago. The jury (composed of a majority of women) retired to the jury room for the purpose of electing a foreman. A short time passed when suddenly a highly perturbed bailiff ran out of the room and approached the judge.

"It's the women!" the excited man exclaimed. "They refuse to elect a foreman!"

The judge was at first indignant but soon the

whole story came out. A mouse, having made its way into the jury room, had all the women standing on chairs!

The building custodian was called, and having chased the mouse under a radiator, some semblance of order returned to the jury room. The women resumed their seats and were about to vote. By this time, however, it was unnecessary. Having himself become upset by the mouse, the plaintiff decided to settle the case out of court after all!

—Pete Boggs.

Your Best Bet in Science-Fiction
AMAZING STORIES

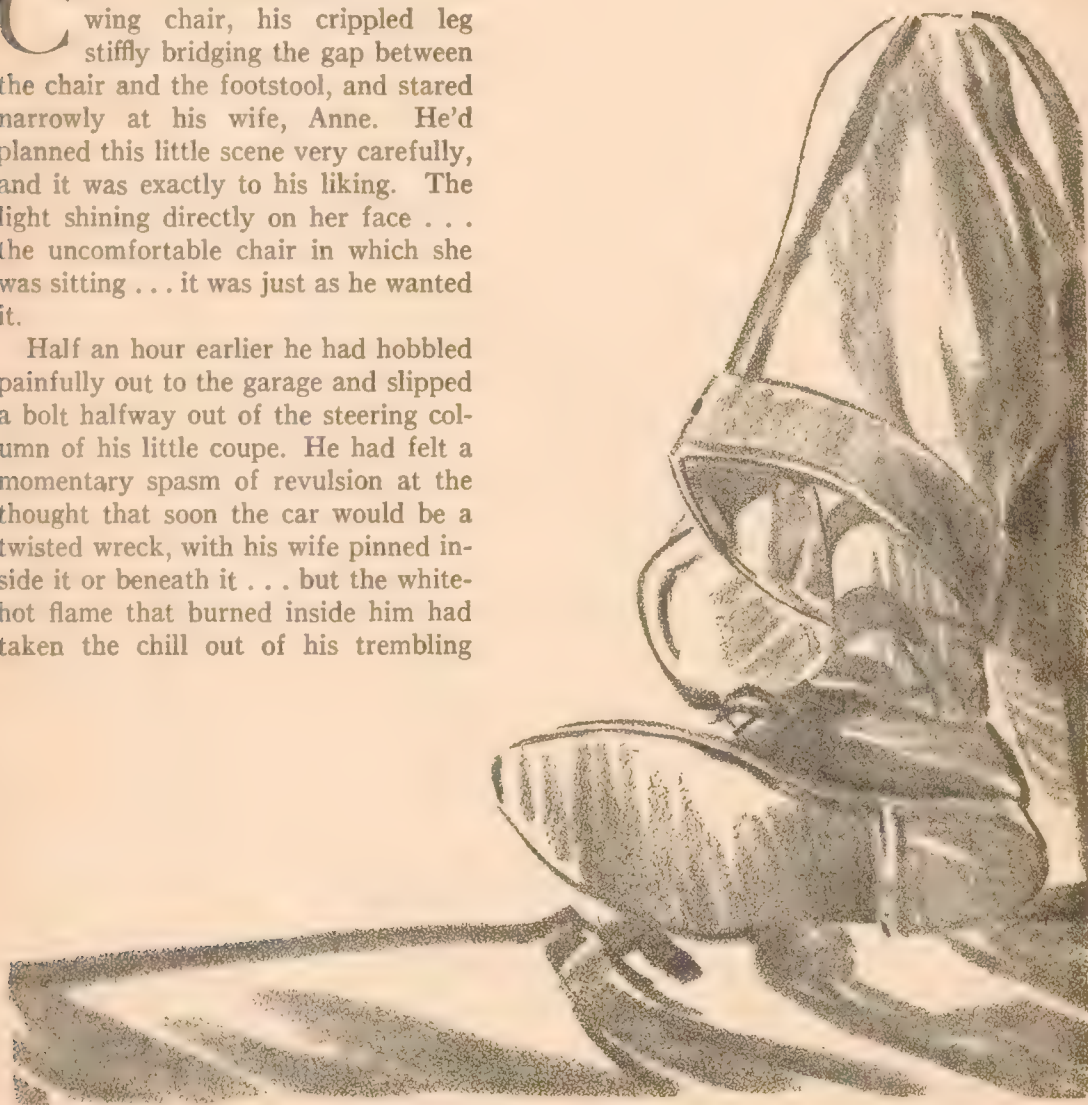
Never Too Late

by Ray Darby

To a suspicious mind, everything is suspect. But Hendricks' wife acted so strangely he had reason to wonder

CARL HENDRICKS sat in the wing chair, his crippled leg stiffly bridging the gap between the chair and the footstool, and stared narrowly at his wife, Anne. He'd planned this little scene very carefully, and it was exactly to his liking. The light shining directly on her face . . . the uncomfortable chair in which she was sitting . . . it was just as he wanted it.

Half an hour earlier he had hobbled painfully out to the garage and slipped a bolt halfway out of the steering column of his little coupe. He had felt a momentary spasm of revulsion at the thought that soon the car would be a twisted wreck, with his wife pinned inside it or beneath it . . . but the white-hot flame that burned inside him had taken the chill out of his trembling



In his mind's eye he could see the car as
it plunged over the cliff; could hear his
wife's frantic scream



fingers. And then he had lurched back down the cinder drive towards the light that burned over the back door . . . feeling the first splattering drops of rain on his bare head and neck.

Anne laid her magazine aside. He had been waiting for it. Her eyes met his, and an abrupt question leapt into them. Her lips . . . the red lips that were so tantalizing . . . gave substance to the question.

"You're . . . looking very grim, Carl. Is anything wrong?"

Carl placed the tips of his fingers together, a characteristic attitude developed from long hours of studying and sifting evidence in the courts. He continued to stare coldly at his wife. Presently he said, "I'm thinking."

Anne said, "Does thinking always affect you like this?"

"Not always." He wondered how long she could take it. He wondered when her gaze would break, her eyes shift. But it was quick sympathy that showed in her expression, not the guilt he had expected.

"I'm sorry," Anne said. "Does it hurt so much tonight?"

"My leg?"

"Yes."

"It hurts all the time. No more tonight than usual."

She looked puzzled again. "Then what is it, Carl? I've been worrying about you lately. You haven't been yourself. You look so—tired, and morose. You hardly ever talk to me any more."

That was it. The opening. A good lawyer always let the opposition create an opening.

"You're not around very much," he said.

Anne looked down. "Maybe it's just as well. You don't seem to enjoy my company like you used to."

"It's like an argument," Carl feinted.

"It takes two to make good company." He paused. "Are you sure you enjoy mine?"

"Now, Carl . . ."

"Of course, I really shouldn't blame you . . ."

"Carl . . . please don't become introspective over this thing. You got along so well at first. You made up your mind to make the best of it, and you did, until—"

"Until?" Carl prodded.

"Until lately," she finished.

He savored the flatness of her reply, and let the flavor of it hang in the room like a wisp of steam from a cookpot. Then he said, "I'll never walk properly again. I know it . . . and so do you."

"There's always a chance, Carl . . ."

"You mean that specialist . . . Dr. Charbleau?"

"Yes."

HE GRINNED crookedly at her. "Dr. Charbleau . . . and ten thousand dollars! Why not throw in the moon and a couple of planets while you're at it?"

"We could manage it between us, Carl."

"No!" He threw the word at her. "I pay my own way!"

Anne sighed. "Yes, Carl."

"And I'm still paying your way too," he added. "I think."

That hit the mark. He watched her flinch, as he had watched so many criminals draw back from the sting of a good point.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What do you think I mean, Anne?"

"I—don't know, exactly. You've said so many things that I don't understand, lately."

Carl suddenly changed course . . . confusion tactics. "You've been enjoying yourself though, haven't you,

Anne?"

"I've been busy."

"Yes. I've noticed that. My mind's all right, you know. It's not walking around with a crutch yet."

Anne uncrossed her long, slim legs and leaned forward in her chair. "Please, Carl. I wish you'd tell me what's been troubling you. You've been so moody. It's not good for you to get all upset."

Carl forced himself to ignore the absorbed loveliness of the woman who sat opposite him—the face and the figure that had always thrilled him with the sharp, unreasoning thrill of a man deeply in love. It was time for the truth.

"You forget I'm a lawyer, Anne," he said. "You're making a big mistake . . . trying to hide things from me."

Anne said quickly, "Trying to hide things from you?" Then her eyes grew veiled, and she said quietly, "What do you know?"

"I know you're very beautiful."

"Thanks. But that's not a compliment. Not the way you say it."

"I also know you're tied to a husband who can't keep up with you any more," Carl went on relentlessly. "A husband who can only manage to stagger out of the house twice a week . . . faltering with a crutch, like an old man."

"I'm sorry, Carl. You know how badly I feel about that. But it doesn't do any good to brood about it. You'll be walking again one of these days."

It was time for the *coup-de-grace*. He let her have it . . . and his voice was bitter. "Are you sure you want me to walk again, Anne? Are you quite sure you wouldn't sooner have me sitting right here in my chair . . . where I can't spoil your fun?"

Anne was properly shocked. "Carl!"

"That's right," he went on. "Let's make a show of it, by all means. You always were a clever actress, Anne. You'd have been a headliner if you hadn't married me."

"That's not true," Anne protested. "You know why. I couldn't remember my lines. They told me once I had the world's worst memory. I was always in trouble over it." The rush of words stopped, then she added more gently. . . . "And besides, I married you because I wanted to. Because I . . . loved you."

Carl nodded. "I believe you. You married me for better or for worse, expecting the best. Well, you got the worst."

Anne said, "I got what I wanted." Then she said evenly, "Let's have it, Carl. What are you driving at?"

THE light from the lamp on the table beside her chair brought out every shade of expression on her face. He'd always had a flair for the dramatic. He built up the suspense. "Are you quite comfortable, Anne?" he said with elaborate politeness.

"Quite."

"Good." He paused. Soon she would begin to fidget. The light would show it. The light would bring it out—that and the deadly stare of his own cold eyes. And he wanted her to fidget. He wanted her to feel the full weight of the thing that was in his mind, that had been eating into his brain like an acid for weeks now. She wouldn't go to her death thinking she'd cheated him out of the satisfaction of knowing.

"Little things, Anne," he said. "It's the little things that trip you up every time."

"Go on," Anne said without flinching. "I'm on the witness stand, is that it?"

"In a manner of speaking—yes."

"Go on, then."

"You always did drive too fast, Anne. I warned you to take it easy, but you wouldn't listen. I lay under that car for two hours. Remember?"

Her eyes closed briefly. "That's cruel, Carl . . . reminding me of that."

"They said it was a miracle I lived." He paused, watching the hurt in her face. Then he went on, "You fooled me for a long time, Anne. You took such good care of me. You even brought on a few tears now and then, just to complete the illusion. You tried so hard to make me think I wasn't being a burden to you . . ."

"But you weren't, Carl! Really, I . . ."

"And then, Anne," he interrupted relentlessly, "and then the little things I spoke about . . ."

"What little things?" She had grown pale. It was hard to tell just what sort of feeling her face mirrored at that moment. Her lips stood out in the paleness of her face.

"You began going out more and more often. I'd ask you where you were going, but you never gave me a direct answer. Always it was something evasive." He waited, but she neither moved nor spoke. "And then I saw you with the man. That was the first time. I was crossing the street—on the arm of a policeman. There was plenty of traffic. You nearly hit me, you and this man. The policeman yanked me back, and as the car passed I saw you sitting there in the front seat with the man. You were smiling at him—the way you used to smile at me." He paused again. "It was a big, shiny car, Anne, and you were in it. And I was a helpless cripple on the arm of a policeman . . ."

Anne said slowly, "Are you condemning me for that?"

"Not for that alone. I began to see

the two of you together more often after that. Once you were having lunch together, and another time you were standing together in front of an office building, and you were laughing up at him. . . ."

He choked, remembering how the sight had stabbed him.

Anne said dully, "It could be coincidence. . . ."

"No. Coincidences like that are too rare. I saw how you felt. That's one drawback to having the temperament of an actress, Anne. Your face always shows your innermost feelings."

ANNE was fighting for composure, but instead of the satisfaction he expected to feel, Carl was almost physically ill. He controlled it, and drove home his final points. "And then there was the letter. . . ."

"The letter?"

"You haven't forgotten, have you? Remember the day I came home early and surprised you with the letter in your hand? You were reading it aloud . . . very softly. I remember every word." His voice grew suddenly harsh. "I remember it because every word went into me like a knife!"

Anne was very white and tense, but the complete breakdown hadn't come yet. Carl sharpened his last sword and lunged.

"And then I found out he'd been here! Here—in this house! I found pipe ashes in the ash tray. I found his fountain pen! Do you think I'm stupid, Anne? Did you honestly think you could hide it from me?"

Anne said nothing. She looked at him, her shoulders slumped, and suddenly she looked very tired.

"I'm giving you a chance!" Carl shouted. "Deny it if you can! Deny that he was here!"

Still she sat there in the glare of the

light, saying nothing. In his heart, Carl was praying she'd have something to say, that she could somehow refute the evidence. But it was too solid against her.

Carl sank back in his chair, and a long sigh escaped his lips. "Well, Anne, there's your case."

She spoke at last. "I'm sorry for you, Carl," she said.

"I don't want your sympathy!" he snapped.

"You're not really like this," Anne said. "Not vicious—like this. I don't know what's got into you, lately. You've been sitting here, brooding so much."

"I've been working out my case."

"You don't know what you're saying," Anne went on. She got to her feet, and he could see the agitation that was in her . . . the shame that she controlled so well. She was beautiful, standing there. Even in her shallowness and guilt, she was beautiful. Carl looked at her, and he knew why he'd fixed that steering column. He loved her—desperately. If she couldn't belong to him, she'd never belong to anyone else.

"I've got to go now, Carl," Anne said. "Please think it over while I'm gone."

"I'll think of many things while you're gone."

Still she denied him the satisfaction of breaking down. "I'll be back presently."

"Don't hurry," Carl said sardonically. "And above all, don't tell me where you're going this time."

"I can't." There were tears in her eyes, though—tears she squeezed back as she swiftly turned and went into the hall, out of his sight. A moment later he heard the outer door close.

Carl slumped suddenly in his chair. There were beads of sweat on his fore-

head, and he wiped it shakily. The car roared outside, backing down the driveway. Anne always drove too fast.

It was a long time before he moved. At least, from the depths of the fog in which his mind stumbled blindly, it seemed like a long time. Actually, it was probably only a few minutes before he was roused by a knock at the door . . . a knock that was repeated before he recognized it.

He called, "Yes? Who is it?"

THE door opened just beyond the line of his vision, around the corner of the hall, and he heard footsteps. A moment later the man who made those footsteps came into the room. Carl stiffened.

"You must be Mr. Hendricks," said his visitor pleasantly. He was a tall man, Carl saw, very well groomed and expensively dressed, and the hair at his temples was graying. He knew the man at once. He'd seen that face so often in his dreams . . . so often as he sat uncomfortably in his chair, staring at the wall and thinking of Anne.

"I'm sorry," Carl said thickly. "I can't get up."

"Don't bother. I'm Dr. Charbleau. I'd like to talk to you for a minute, if I may."

And that was the second shock. Now the other man had a personality, a name. He was Charbleau, the specialist. It was easy enough to figure out how Anne had come in contact with him.

Carl got a grip on himself, and it took a conscious effort. He wasn't used to dealing with situations he hadn't had time to prepare for. "Sit down, Doctor," he invited.

"Thanks." Charbleau took the chair Anne had vacated, and the third degree glare of the lamp shone on his face. That suited Carl, too.

"I'm only going to stay a minute or two," Charbleau said crisply. "I know you weren't expecting me."

It was a colossal understatement. Carl eyed him like a boxer watching for an opening—a weak spot. He knew he should hate this man. This was the man who should be in the car with Anne right now . . . rushing headlong towards destruction. He waited, wondering how the great doctor would approach the subject.

"I suppose you know what I've come to talk about, Mr. Hendricks."

"Yes."

"You see . . . I've heard a great deal about you. . . ."

"From my wife?"

"From Anne; yes."

Of course, he would call her by her first name. And yet the sound of it sent a shock through Carl. "Well?" he said.

"Anne doesn't know I decided to come here and have it out with you. In fact, she asked me to stay away until she had things better prepared."

"Yes," Carl said acidly. "She's a well-bred woman, Dr. Charbleau. She always does things the conventional way."

"Just the same," Charbleau went on, "you've got to give Anne plenty of credit. This business hasn't been easy for her."

"No," Carl admitted, "I don't imagine it has. These things are never pleasant, are they?"

"Very seldom." Charbleau's fine grey eyes moved about the room, taking in all the little touches: the flowers on the end table, the highly polished pewter jug beside it. Things that were essentially Anne's. "She's an intriguing woman, Mr. Hendricks."

"I agree with you, Doctor."

"Well . . ." Charbleau's gaze returned to Carl. "We'd better get this over with before she comes back. There

are a few details to settle."

CARL nodded, a little amazed at the cool nonchalance of the man. "Suppose she doesn't come back?" he said.

"She'll be back. It won't take more than an hour or so."

"You seem to know my wife's habits very well, Doctor."

"I should. We've discussed this thing often enough. But look here, Hendricks, that's why I wanted to talk to you. I don't feel it's quite fair to keep all this in the dark."

"Thanks," Carl said. "That's very thoughtful of you, Doctor."

"I thought you ought to know. Its only fair."

"Perhaps I do know. Ever think of that?"

"I don't see how you could. Your wife has been at such great pains to keep it from you."

"Naturally."

"As a matter of fact, the only reason I'm here is because I think it's wiser to point out a few things about the operation to you beforehand."

Carl sat up.

"In the first place," Dr. Charbleau went on, "it's been a year since those X-rays Anne showed me were taken. We'll need a few more plates. An injury like this can change rapidly, you know."

A shudder passed through Carl Hendricks. His voice sounded small, lost in the room. "Is this why you've come to see me, Dr. Charbleau?"

The specialist was very professional now. "Of course. I haven't the time for social calls. Now—in the second place, you must understand that I can't guarantee the result. It's a delicate operation, Mr. Hendricks. We can expect the best, but that's as far as it goes. Now there's one more thing. About the cost of the operation—"

The Doctor's face swam in front of Carl's blurred eyes. "The . . . cost? I don't understand. . . ."

"Your wife and I have talked it over several times. Naturally, the expense has been one of her biggest worries. But I think we'll be able to keep the cost to a fairly reasonable figure. I—well, it's the least I can do for her . . . after all the work she's done to get that money together."

"Work?" Carl repeated stupidly.

"Yes. You're bound to find out soon enough, so I don't suppose it'll hurt if I tell you. She's been on the radio, Mr. Hendricks. Very successful, too."

Carl gripped the arms of his chair. He felt the odd sensation of swaying, and the Doctor's words came to him as though from the other side of a door.

"Yes, she's done some very fine work. She's told me about her stage career, and how her bad memory spoiled her chances there. But on the radio it's vastly different. She has a script right in front of her all the time. She can read her lines." He paused. "Anne is turning out to be one of our finest radio actresses. You would have found out, sooner or later."

Carl could see, even through the mist, that the specialist was staring at him curiously. He watched Charbleau rise from his chair and swiftly cross the room to stand over him.

"Why," he exclaimed, "what's the matter with you, man? Are you ill?"

"God!" Carl mumbled. "What have I done!"

Charbleau reached for his pulse. "You're pale as a ghost. Where's the kitchen? I'll get you a glass of water."

CARL struggled upright. "No! No! No! Lord! I've got to do something! I'm a fool, a blind, jealous fool! I've got to stop her!" He was shouting, and Charbleau had him by

the arms, trying to force him back into his seat.

"Easy," he urged. "Sit down, Mr. Hendricks."

"No!" Carl raged. "Let me go! I—I've been wrong! I must stop her!"

"Sit down!" Charbleau said sharply. "I've got a hypo in my bag."

Carl was still battling the doctor's strong grip when the front door banged suddenly open again. There were footsteps in the hall, hurrying footsteps.

"Thank Heavens," Charbleau said. "Here's Anne now." He raised his voice. "Come here, Anne. Quickly!"

Carl went limp. The fight went out of him as suddenly as it had come. Dimly he heard Anne's voice saying, "Dr. Charbleau! What are you doing here? Oh-h-h! I'm late already, and I forgot my script. . . ."

"Anne!" Carl cried. "Anne, is it really you?"

She sounded desperate. "Yes. Of course it's me! I've got exactly five minutes before I go on the air, and I want to know what you two have been up to but I can't wait! Where's my script? What have I done with—"

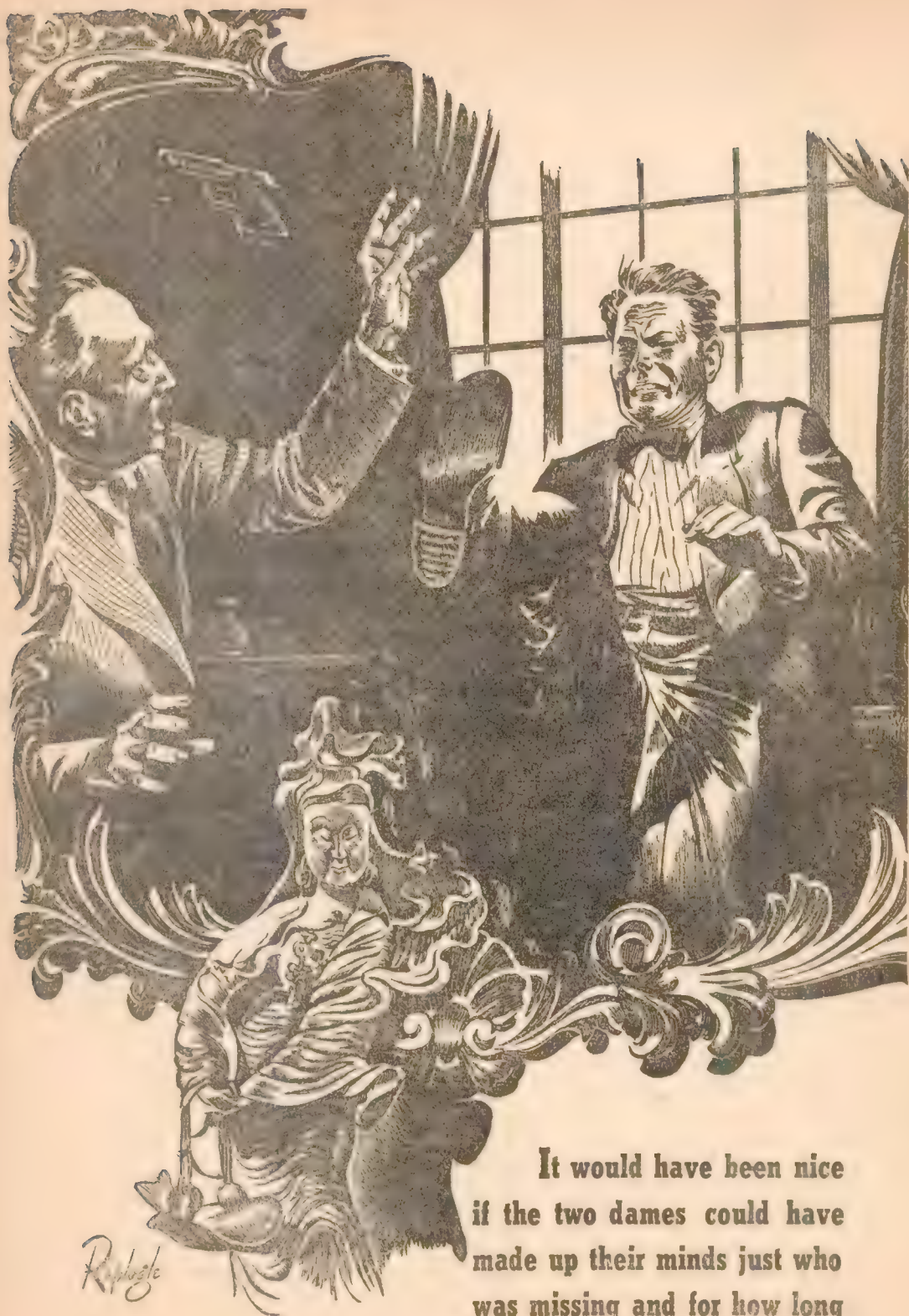
"Anne!" Carl's voice was clearer now. It rang sharply. "Never mind your script! Oh . . . Anne! Come here! Let me look at you!"

She stopped her frantic search. There was something in the quality of his voice that made her stop and come to him wonderingly. "But Carl," she said. "I thought you were—"

"Never mind what you thought! I've been a fool, Anne. A complete, miserable fool! Oh, darling—darling . . ."

Dr. Charbleau cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I've upset him, Anne. I should have taken your advice. It was just that I thought he ought to know about the operation. I had no idea it would hit him so hard."

(Concluded on page 178)



**It would have been nice
if the two dames could have
made up their minds just who
was missing and for how long**

The Reynolds' Case

by William P. McGivern



I WAS sitting behind my desk when the interoffice phone buzzed. I opened the connection and my secretary's voice said:

"A young woman to see you, Mr. Cole."

I wasn't expecting anyone and I had some work to do on a case that was giving me trouble, and I wasn't too happy about the interruption.

"What does she want?" I said.

"She's in trouble of some sort," Clare said. "She won't give me any details. She insists on seeing you."

"My fatal charm," I murmured.

"Don't be funny, Michael."

"I'll see her," I said. "Make sure she has no aphrodisiacs concealed in her purse and send her in."

"An aphrodisiac is a love potion, isn't it? I thought you'd be all for that."

He had a gun and it was pointed at me. But he was so busy watching my face that he forgot about my foot

"Kindly go to hell, darling," I said, and broke the connection.

The girl came in a few seconds later. I stood up and asked her to sit down in a comfortable leather chair which faced my desk. She sat down and looked at me nervously.

She was about twenty-two or -three, with light blonde hair, grey eyes and a startlingly clear complexion. Her clothes were simple and she was well groomed. The total effect was of a nice wholesome girl from some small town in Michigan, perhaps, and that made the nervous, anxious expression on her face completely out of character.

I leaned against the desk and lit a cigarette.

"My name, as you probably know, is Michael Cole. What's yours, please?"

"Janet Reynolds. I—found your name in the directory, Mr. Cole. I didn't want to go to the police. That's why I came to you."

"I see. Was there any special reason that made you pick me? There are dozens of private detectives listed in the phone book."

"No. I—I just ran my finger down the list and when I got to your name I stopped. I don't know why."

"It doesn't matter. I was just curious. Now what do you need a private detective for?"

SHE twisted her gloved hands together and looked at the floor.

"I'm not even sure I do need you, Mr. Cole. Maybe I'm just being silly. But it was such an odd thing for my sister to do that I got worried."

"All right, let's have all of it. Start at what you think is the beginning and tell me what's bothering you."

"My sister—her name is Cathy—left home about three years ago and came here to Chicago to work. She wrote me quite regularly all that time but I

never saw her. Twice she was supposed to come home for a vacation but something always interfered. This year I finished college and I wrote her I was coming in to see her. She wrote back that it was all right and she seemed quite excited about the fun we'd have. She got me a reservation at the Sherman Hotel and I got here last week. Then—"

I said, "Let me ask a couple of questions before you go on. Where is your home?"

"Madison, Wisconsin."

I hadn't been too far wrong. My guess had been Michigan.

"And you went to Wisconsin University?"

"Yes, that's right."

"What kind of a job did your sister have?"

"She worked for the Global Import and Export company."

"Was it a pretty good job?"

"Oh, yes. She made excellent money. She put me through school and took care of almost everything I wanted."

"Cathy is older than you, I gather."

"Yes. She's six years older than I am. She's a lot smarter, too."

"All right, let's have the rest of it," I said. "You arrived in town intending to surprise your sister. Then what happened?"

"She wasn't here," she said gravely. "I checked into the Sherman Hotel and tried to call her, but there wasn't any answer. Finally I went out to her apartment. She lives on Elm Street. The manager told me that she had gone out to California and said she'd be back in a few weeks."

"Is that unusual?"

"No. . . . But then I went to her office. I met her employer and he gave me the address she was staying at in Los Angeles. I wired her and asked what I should do."

"And what did she say?"

"The wire was returned. There was no person of her name at the address."

I put another cigarette in my mouth. "Is that all? Is that why you decided to come and see me?"

"Yes . . . I don't know whether I did the right thing, but I was so worried I had to do something. Where could she be if she's not in California?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Do you want me to go ahead and find out what I can?"

"Yes, please. I'm so worried and anxious. I just know something is wrong. There isn't any reason for her to just disappear like this."

"She hasn't disappeared," I said. "At least, we can presume she hasn't. And let's not assume there isn't some reason for her acting as she did. There may be a very good reason."

"But what could it be?"

"I can't tell you," I said. "I may never be able to tell you, but I'll do my best. Where can I get in touch with you in the meanwhile?"

"I left the Sherman," she said. She flushed a little. "I didn't have much money with me when I came in. I'm staying at a boarding house now on Rush Street."

SHE gave me the number and I made a note of it. She also gave me her sister's address in California and the address of her apartment on Elm Street. There wasn't any more information she could give me after that, so I told her I'd check into things and get in touch with her in a day or so. She thanked me and left.

I buzzed Clare.

"I'm going to do a little work for this girl. Make up a file card and tag it the Reynolds' case."

"All right. Was there any exchange of that vulgar stuff called money?"

"Unfortunately, no. I'm doing this in lieu of a Red Cross donation this year."

"It's so nice that we're an endowed institution."

"Money isn't everything," I said. "It won't buy friends, it won't buy happiness, it won't buy any of the important things in life."

"You must be talking about Confederate money," she said, and broke the connection.

I leaned back in my chair and thought about the Reynold's case for a while. I got precisely nothing in the way of inspiration so I wired a friend in California who is in the agency business and for whom I'd done a few favors, and told him to check on a Cathy or Catherine Reynolds at the address her sister had given me. I told him to tell Catherine Reynolds to wire her sister immediately at the address on Rush Street. I also asked him to wire me what he'd found out and to let me know if anything looked peculiar.

That was all I could do for a while so I went back to work on a case involving a phony life insurance claim. At least the insurance company thought it was phony, but their investigators hadn't gotten anywhere, so they'd asked me to look into it.

That kept me busy until noon and since there wasn't any answer as yet to my west coast wire I went out to lunch. I stopped in the reception room and grinned at Clare.

She was working on a cross word puzzle and a strand of her dark hair had fallen over her face. She looked very lovely and completely absorbed.

"May I see Mr. Cole?" I said.

She dropped the paper and said, "Why, yes of course. I'll see—" before she recognized me. Then she smiled coldly.

"Such a darling sense of humor," she said. "I loathe practical jokers," she added bitterly.

"Sorry to take you away from your work, but I'm going out to lunch. If any veiled, mysterious women call, tell them I'm tied up all afternoon with a lush vampire."

"I hope she's thirsty," she said. "The prospect of someone siphoning off about two quarts of that ice water you call blood is strangely pleasing to me right at the moment."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," I said. "Carry on with your work."

She made a face at me and then picked up the paper.

I was reaching for the door when she said, "Oh, Michael, wait a minute. What's a three letter word for hilarity?"

"Gin," I said, and went out the door, hoping she wouldn't realize how old that gag was.

WHEN I got back from lunch about an hour later there was a wire waiting for me from California. I opened it up and read:

No Cathy or Catherine Reynolds at address you gave me. Checked all hotels in city and got same result. Who is Catherine Reynolds? Don't bother reply unless she is blonde, lonely and wants to meet fat, unattractive lecher.

That was about what I expected. For some reason Cathy Reynolds desired to remain incognito in Los Angeles, providing she actually was in Los Angeles.

I put my hat on again and told Clare I'd be gone a few hours. There was only one or two things to do and they shouldn't take long.

My first stop was her apartment on

Elm Street. The building was an expensive-looking six flat with artificial palms standing beside the entrance and a small chaste lobby. There were six bell buttons with name cards beneath them, and in the corner was a desk with a glass name plate on it.

The name on the plate was *Carstairs*, and beneath that was the word "manager" spelled in lower-case letters. I went back to the buzzer and looked for the name card with Carstairs on it. I buzzed twice and waited.

A miniature voice floated out of a speaking tube.

"Hello?"

"I'm a representative from the Mutual Insurance company. I'm here to check evaluations on Miss Reynolds' furs. I'd like to get into her apartment. Can you help me out?"

". . . Miss Reynolds is in California."

"I know that. I talked to her this morning on the phone. She wants this evaluation made and the policies written before she gets back."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

The miniature voice sounded doubtful.

"Okay, Mister, if you want to take the responsibility of her policies lapsing in the meantime, it's okay with me."

That story was full of holes but people will generally cooperate if you get the impression across that they're liable to be stuck in the middle.

"All right. I'll come down right away," the voice said.

I waited while the elevator descended. The door opened and a little man wearing a neat black suit was standing in the elevator.

"I'm Vincent Carstairs," he said. "I'll take you up to Miss Reynolds' apartment."

"Fine," I said. "My name is Cole, Michael Cole."

WE RODE up to the third floor in silence. He looked at me nervously once or twice. I looked at a point on the wall about two inches above his gnome-like, greying head and whistled something from the Hit Parade.

At the third floor the elevator stopped and the doors opened noiselessly. He walked right down a wide corridor carpeted in soft gray and stopped before a cream-colored door that was numbered 306.

I followed him and when I stopped beside him he had the door open and we walked in together.

The apartment was large and comfortably furnished. There were shelves of books flanking a fire-place and deep leather chairs and a combination bar and radio in the corner. On the mantle was a framed picture of a lovely, dark-haired girl. She was smiling and the smile gave a warmth and friendliness to features which in repose might be cold.

"Miss Reynolds," Carstairs said, nodding at the picture.

I said, "Yes," which could mean anything and walked through the rest of the apartment. The closet in her bedroom was well stocked with clothes that hadn't come from a bargain basement sale. Carstairs was right behind me and he looked owlishly impressed while I fingered the sleeves of the two fur coats hanging there.

I clucked my tongue and looked thoughtful and then I closed the door.

"Did Miss Reynolds leave for California in a hurry?" I asked.

"Why, no. Is anything wrong?"

"No . . . Had she planned the trip for some time?"

He frowned and ran his hands through his thinning hair.

"I wouldn't know about that. She just left a note for me. Said she'd be gone a couple of weeks."

I nodded. "Did she mention anything about expecting a visit from her sister?"

He started to reply and then he clamped his mouth shut and looked at me suspiciously. "Say, what's this got to do with her insurance?"

"Nothing," I said. I took my wallet out and showed him my operative's license. "Forget about the insurance. I'm a private detective."

"But you said there wasn't anything wrong," he said.

"Probably there isn't," I said. "I just want some information."

"Well, I'll help all I can."

"Who were her friends. Good friends, I mean."

"I really don't know," he said.

"How long has she lived here?"

"Let me see. . . . About two and a half years, I think."

"Did any men call on her here?"

"Well, no. But I couldn't really tell about that. You see, if someone wanted to come up here I wouldn't know anything about it. There isn't any room clerk here. These are all private apartments."

"Miss Reynolds' sister has been here, hasn't she?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right. She seemed surprised, now that I think about it, that her sister was gone." He said all this with a worried, important look. "She came just the other day and tried her sister's apartment, then got in touch with me. I told her what I knew. That her sister had gone to California and would be back in a few weeks."

I thanked him and left. Outside, I found a drug store and looked up the address of the Global Importing Company. They had offices on North Michigan Boulevard. I had a coke at the counter and discussed the world situation briefly with a large woman on my left, and went out and got a cab.

THE receptionist of the Global Import and Export Company was blonde and cute. She sat behind a light maple wood desk that just about matched her hair.

"Who's the head man, honey?" I asked.

"Mr. Taylor?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm asking."

"Mr. Taylor is the president of the firm," she said. "But he's in conference right now."

I whistled. "You mean one of those big conferences like they have in the movies. Fat men, fat cigars, and the president pounding his fist on a mahogany table?"

She smiled a little uncertainly. "I don't know. He's just in a conference, that's all."

"Would you tell him I want to talk to him about Virginia Reynolds?"

"Well, all right," she said doubtfully.

I lit a cigarette while she made the connection. After she told someone what I'd asked her to, she put the phone back and looked at me in amazement.

"He says for you to go right in."

She told me how to find Mr. Taylor's office and I pushed through a large glass door, followed a broad corridor until I reached an office which had Taylor's name on in neat gold letters. I knocked and a heavy voice said to come in.

I opened the door and walked into a large, pleasantly decorated office. Behind a desk, with his back to three large windows, sat a big man in a tan suit. He had blonde hair, combed straight back, and his eyes were bright blue.

"Taylor?" I said.

"Yes. Sit down." He waved a large, well-manicured hand at a chair beside his desk. "What's this about Virginia Reynolds?"

"I'm a private detective," I said.

"I've been retained by Virginia Reynolds' sister to find her."

"Virginia is in California," he said, but he didn't sound too positive.

"Possibly. But she's not at the address you gave her sister. Neither is she at any of the hotels—at least she's not registered as Virginia Reynolds. Do you know of any reason for that?"

"No, I don't," he said slowly. "I—haven't heard from Virginia, but I know of no reason why she'd change her mind about going to California."

"Why was she supposed to go out there?" I asked.

"Just routine business," he said.

"How long did she expect to stay?"

He shrugged. "That would depend on the business. Possibly two weeks, but maybe a month."

"What is her job here?"

"Practically a partner," he said, with a slight smile. "Her title is assistant to the president, but she is as important as I am in the operation of the business."

"Must have been pretty important."

He smiled, but he didn't like it. "I think," he said, "that Virginia's sister is letting her imagination run away with her. Probably there's a very ordinary explanation of this whole thing."

"That's what I'm looking for," I said.


"Well, have the police been notified?"

"That's up to Janet Reynolds. If I don't scare up something by tomorrow my advice to her, as a client, will be to notify the Missing Persons Bureau."

He nodded slowly. "That's undoubtedly the thing to do."

I stood up. "Thanks for the information," I said.

BACK at the office Clare was putting on lipstick. I hung up my hat and



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coat, sat down and lit a cigarette.

"If you don't need me," she said, "I'm going home. I want to take a shower, do my nails, and get a shampoo tonight."

I smiled at her. She looked very pretty.

"Go ahead," I told her. "I'll be down for a while yet."

She looked at me and said, "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried," I said. "This Reynolds' case is bothering me. A girl disappears for no reason at all, and that isn't unusual. But there seems to be an angle here that's staring me right in the face, and I can't see it."

"I don't need to do my nails tonight," Clare said. "Would you like me to stay down a while and talk it over?"

"No, you run along."

"Okay," she said.

When she'd gone I poured a drink and spent a couple of hours looking out the window, watching the lights of the city. I didn't see anything interesting. Finally I locked up and went home.

The next morning there was a special delivery letter waiting for me. I opened it up and read:

Dear Mr. Cole.

I'm so sorry for having bothered you about my sister's disappearance. Naturally I was worried and I don't think I did wrong in asking you to help me. But last night my sister returned from California, and now I feel pretty silly about making such a fuss. She's all right, of course, and I hope I didn't put you to too much trouble looking for her. Thanks so much for being so understanding.

It was signed Janet Reynolds and there was a hundred dollar money order, payable to me, enclosed in the letter.

I scratched my ear and looked at the letter. That got me nowhere. I was still staring at it when my desk buzzer sounded. I flipped the switch and Clare's voice said:

"Michael, there's a Virginia Reynolds to see you."

"Send her in," I said. I put the letter from Janet Reynolds in my desk drawer. In a moment my door opened and a tall young woman, with light blonde hair and enormous blue eyes entered my office. She was wearing a steel gray suit and I noticed academically that her legs were long, slim and shapely.

"Mr. Cole?" she asked.

"Yes. Won't you sit down?"

SHE smiled then, and it had the effect of softening her face, of giving to her wide eyes an instant warmth and friendliness.

"Thank you. I'm Janet's sister." She sat down and crossed her legs. "I'm not here on business," she said, smiling. "I just wanted to thank you for being so nice to Janet. She was worried about me and she tells me you were very helpful and sympathetic."

"Don't mention it," I said. "Actually, it was a business proposition, but I was glad she came to me. She needed a little pat on the back. She was under the impression that you'd been waylaid by a band of white slavers and shipped off to China. By the way, what did happen to you?"

"Nothing so exciting," she said, with mock-disappointment. "I wasn't able to get a hotel room, so I stayed with a friend. I didn't know Janet was coming in, and I had no idea, of course, that I was going to cause her so much worry."

"Naturally," I said.

She stood up, and she did it with a grace that few women ever acquire.

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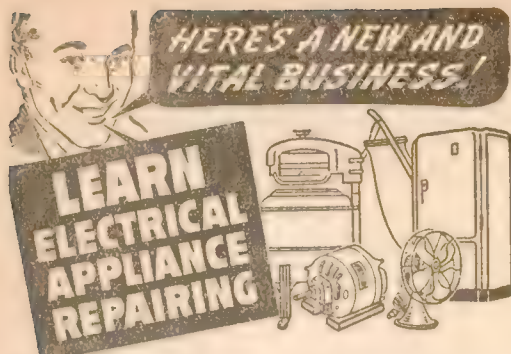
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"I've got to be running along now," she said. "I hope I haven't taken too much of your time just to tell you I'm grateful."

"Not at all," I said.

She moved toward the door. "By the way," she said, turning and smiling with amusement, "were the police concerned about my disappearance?"

"Police? I didn't call them in," I said. "I might have today, but it turns out it's not necessary."

"I'm glad it did," she said. "I wouldn't enjoy feeling like Mati Hari." She paused again with her hand on the door. "Would you like to have dinner some night with Janet and me? She'll be in town a few days and we might have fun talking over the disappearance of the wayward sister."

"Sounds fine," I said. "Just give me a few hours notice so I can get my suit shined."

"It's a date," she said. She smiled again, waved to me, and went out the door.

I sat for a while, thinking. Then I got Janet's letter out again and read it. I read it twice. I didn't learn anything. But the size of the money order disturbed me. She had said she wasn't very well fixed financially, and here she had come through with a hundred bucks for twenty-five dollars worth of work.

That didn't have to mean anything, however. The return of her sister probably had improved her financial status. I put the letter away and folded the money order and put it neatly in my wallet.

I buzzed Clare.

"Close the file on the Reynolds' case," I said.

I went back to work on the insurance case, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The day went by, and the feeling stayed with

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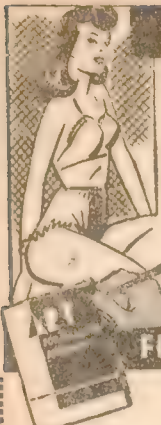
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me. Finally, about four o'clock, I quit trying to work and sat back in my chair and stared out the window. Everything was wound up nice and tight on the Reynolds' case. The sister had returned and I had a hundred bucks. That was a hundred excellent reasons for feeling fine, but I didn't.

At five o'clock Clare came in.

"See you in the morning," she said.

"Okay," I said.

"Now what's wrong?"

I swung my chair around and propped my feet up on the desk.

"I've missed something," I said. "I don't know what, but I've missed it."

"Anything I can do?"

I shook my head.

She left and I sat there staring at the window. I don't know just how it came to me, or why it did, but suddenly it was there.

I swore loudly.

"You blind dunce," I said bitterly.

I grabbed the phone and called the Global Import Company. I was afraid I was too late, but after about a dozen rings someone answered the phone. The voice was thick and old.

"Is Mr. Taylor there?" I asked.

"This is the janitor," the voice said.

"Everybody gone home."

"Can you get me Mr. Taylor's home address? This is important."

"This is the janitor," the voice said loudly. "Everybody gone home."

"You go home, too," I said. "National holiday."

"Who's this? What you say?"

I snarled something impolite into the phone and slammed it back in the cradle. The telephone book listed three pages of Taylor's. I called a friend of mine at City Press and told him what I wanted. He said to hang on and I looked at my watch. Seven o'clock. There might be time, and there might not.

AT TWO minutes after seven my friend had the information I wanted. Without bothering to thank him I hung up, grabbed my hat and coat, and went downstairs. Taylor lived on Lake Shore Drive, in one of those, slate-colored, impressive buildings, with a canopy, and a doorman who looked like a Royal Zouave.

I told the discreet-looking young man at the desk that I wanted to see Mr. Taylor. He told me Mr. Taylor wasn't seeing anyone. I showed him my card and that got better results. He lived on the tenth floor and a jet-propelled elevator took me up there in record time.

I knocked twice on the white-enamelled door and I heard foot steps coming. Taylor opened the door himself. He was wearing a grey flannel suit, English brogues, and a wine colored tie. For a second he just stared at me, and then he ran his hand through his straight blonde hair and smiled in surprise.

He held out a large hand.

"I couldn't imagine who it was," he said. "Come on in."

We shook hands and I followed him into the type of apartment that causes revolutions. There was enough room for a tennis match, and the fine expensive hand of an interior decorator was evident everywhere. Sitting on a green-striped sofa was Virginia Reynolds. She looked at me with the same surprise that Taylor had shown, and smiled.

"I didn't expect to see you so soon," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

I sat down. The chair I chose faced her. Taylor made me a drink without asking, and brought it to me. We all lit cigarettes. There was a funny little silence.

"Weather's getting colder," I said.

"You didn't come to discuss the weather," Taylor said, smiling.

Virginia looked at me speculatively.

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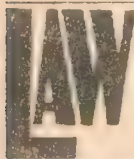
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There was a fire and it caught honey-colored lights in her hair. She looked very nice. Nice and cool and thoughtful.

“What is it, Mr. Cole?”

“I’ve been thinking about you,” I said. I smiled and sipped my drink. “When did you dye your hair?”

She flashed a look at Taylor. It was an uncertain, questioning look.

“Tell me yourself,” I said.

“I—I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

I glanced at Taylor. “You do, don’t you?”

HE TWISTED his glass in his hand and looked at me thoughtfully.

“I think, perhaps, I do?”

“Where’s Virginia Reynolds, then?”

I asked.

“Dead,” he said, slowly. “She and I had a little disagreement. I was forced to kill her. Is that all you wanted to know?”

“I can guess some of the rest,” I said.

“After you killed her you cooked up the story about her going to California. You left a note for the manager of her apartment house telling him she was leaving. What was your idea? Fake some correspondence to the effect that she had resigned and moved to California to live?”

“Something like that,” he said. “I didn’t have all the details worked out. I used the California ruse to gain time.”

“Then when her sister arrived that went out the window,” I said. “She hired me and I started snooping around, talked to you about notifying the police. That meant you had to get me off the case.”

“That’s right,” he said. “I wrote you the note from Janet. Then I sent this young lady to your office to find out whether you’d notified the police.” He looked down at his glass again and frowned. “How did you know she

wasn't Virginia?"

"Virginia was a brunette," I said. "I saw a picture of her in her apartment."

He smiled. "Stupid of me to forget that, but I had a lot of things on my mind."

"Where's Janet Reynolds now?"

"Right here," he said. "We were discussing what to do with her when you arrived. Now we have two problems, don't we?"

I put another cigarette in my mouth and started to reach inside my coat, but Taylor moved faster. His hand dipped into his coat pocket and came out holding a .25 caliber automatic.

I shrugged and settled back in my chair.

"Your move," I said.

"That's right, my move," he smiled.

I had to take a chance. I knew I'd been a damn fool for walking in like some grade B movie character. Now I had to make it the hard way. I leaned forward for an ornamental lighter on a little table, and then I ducked low and drove hard toward Taylor's knees. He swung at my head with the butt of the gun, and I felt it scrape past my ear. Then my shoulder hit his knees and we went down together.


I came up first. I hit him twice and then I kicked his gun hand viciously. The gun flew across the room and I hit him again. He went down limply, and I wheeled as the blonde was starting for the gun. I tripped her and grabbed her arms as she fell. She struggled wildly for a moment, using words that would stump a longshoreman. I twisted one arm high up her back and finally she stopped threshing and began to moan.

"Take it easy, baby," I said.

She took it easy. When I let go she sat on the floor, cursing me in a low, even voice.

Janet was in the bedroom. There

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was tape over her mouth and her wrists and ankles were bound with nylons. When I untied her I called the cops. After that I told her as much as I knew about what had happened, and when the cops had come and gone, I took her out for a drink.

Sometime along the line I called Clare and told her I was sending Janet up to her apartment for the night.

I also told her I wouldn't be down the next day.

LEATHERHEADS

BOBBIES, coppers, gendarmes—these are popular names given to the uniformed police in the U. S. and other countries. Not quite so well known, but a popular nickname for a policeman in earlier days in the U. S. was *leatherhead*. Uniforms then were of minor importance, but a helmet made entirely of leather which completely encased the policeman's head was a necessity, and it is from this protective helmet that the name, leatherhead was derived.

—Lee Owens

WATCH THE LADY

ABURGLARY has been committed. The police investigator goes to the home where the crime occurred. His job is to find out where and how the criminal got into the house, just what he did there, and whether or not he left traces behind that might identify him.

The woman of the house excitedly leads the way, pushing a chair into place here, rearranging some books there, as she points out how she believes the burglar operated. She is particular about her home. She wants things in order so the police officer will not think she is a poor housekeeper.

Lady, lady, don't you see what you are doing? The investigator doesn't care about your housekeeping ability. He wants things left as the crook disarranged them, so that finger prints and other clues may be detected. Your almost unconscious setting-to-rights has probably obliterated important details which would have helped identify the burglar.

Often two officers are sent out to conduct such an investigation. One searches for clues; the other watches the lady of the house to make sure that she does not destroy the clues!—J. Crail

PUT 'EM TO SLEEP!

NEW inventions and discoveries in other fields soon find their way into the realm of crime. When chloroform first came into prominence as an anaesthetic more than 95 years ago, a serious wave of robberies resulted.

The first such case reported is in the files of Scotland Yard in England. Two women, both morally on the notorious side, used chloroform on

a Mr. Jewett, also notorious as a "solicitor" in the Whitechapel Road district, and rendered him unconscious. He woke to find himself lying on a filthy bed in a strange room, stripped of all his clothing and valuables.

Although his health was severely impaired by an overdose of the drug, he recovered sufficiently to be able to identify the two women. They were sentenced to seven years in prison.

—June Lurie

HOME SWEET HOME

LIFE in prison is seldom gay, but to at least one contented convict in Mississippi it was better than any other life he knew. He said as much in a post card to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and directed them to a railroad station where they might pick him up. There he was arrested on charges of extortion, only a few months after his release from jail. In his card he had said, "I've been fighting this cruel world since December, and I'm ready to go back to the pen."

—N. Corbett

SO MUCH CAN GO WRONG

(Concluded from page 131)

name on the front page.

With the front door locked, Digger and Angel read the story in his office.

"I don't understand it," Angel said. "He was a cold-blooded murderer. He killed Tessie Wright, he tried to have you killed. He deliberately drove his wife to insanity. And yet he loved his child, he loved her as he loved nothing else on earth."

"It all comes in the same package in the human animal," Digger said. "Love and hate, love and murder and lust, they're all wrapped up in the same man. You open the package in one place, you find love, you open it in another place and you find lust, you open it in still a third place and murder comes walking out. Or you open it in the same place at different times and love, lust, or murder pop up like jacks out of boxes. But it's the same animal all the time—"

He broke off. A thoughtful look appeared on his face. "I haven't smelled them in a long time now," he said.

"Smelled what?"

"Horse weeds," he answered. "Maybe I won't ever smell them again."

He sighed.

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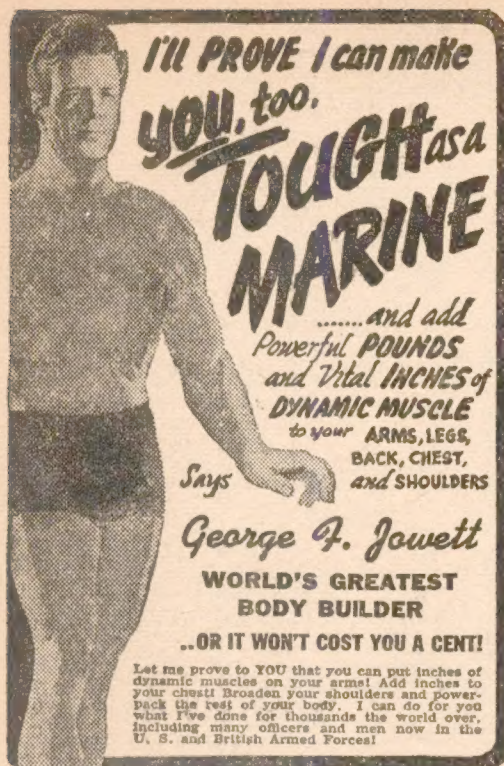
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NAME _____ Age _____

(Please print plainly. Include Zone Number.)

ADDRESS _____

NEVER TOO LATE

(Concluded from page 159)

Carl was on the verge of laughter, hysterical laughter. But he held it back. "It's not the operation. Anne, I'm not fit to touch you, but please come here. Please let me see you close!"

Then she was sitting on the arm of his chair, her arm around his shoulder. And he could smell the fragrance of her, that elusive fragrance that was Anne.

"Forgive me," he said brokenly. "I'll make it up to you somehow. I'll make it up to you if it takes the rest of my life."

Anne was frankly puzzled. "It's all right, Carl. I knew you were upset. You've had so much on your mind..."

"Tell me one thing," Carl said. "That letter I spoke of. Was it one of your radio scripts?"

Anne nodded. "I didn't want you to know. You were so proud of being able to carry on by yourself, in spite of your handicap."

They had both forgotten the doctor. Neither noticed him quietly slipping out the door, smiling gently to himself.

Anne said ruefully. "That terrible memory of mine again. I could have been at the studio by now if I hadn't forgotten the script. Its all marked and scored with my own special code. I couldn't get by without it."

"That wonderful memory of yours." Carl corrected her. His arm tugged at her, and then she was on his lap, with her face buried on his shoulder.

"It doesn't matter now," she said. "They'll probably fire me and blacklist me. But I don't care. I'm not going."

Carl stroked her hair, and his hand was tender. "I'll make it up to you somehow, Anne. Its never too late, is it?"



How to Avoid Saving Money

by DANNY KAYE



To avoid saving money, the first thing is to cut off all your pockets. Thus you will have to carry your money in your hand. Which will insure that you—1. spend it, 2. lose it, 3. get it taken from you—*quicker!*



Also avoid piggy banks. The kiddies in particular are victimized by such devices, often saving quite a bale of moolah. And be sure to avoid budgets or, before you know it, you'll be in the black! It is best to draw your pay and walk down Main Street buying anything you don't particularly hate.

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IF YOU MUST
SAVE

Danny Kaye

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